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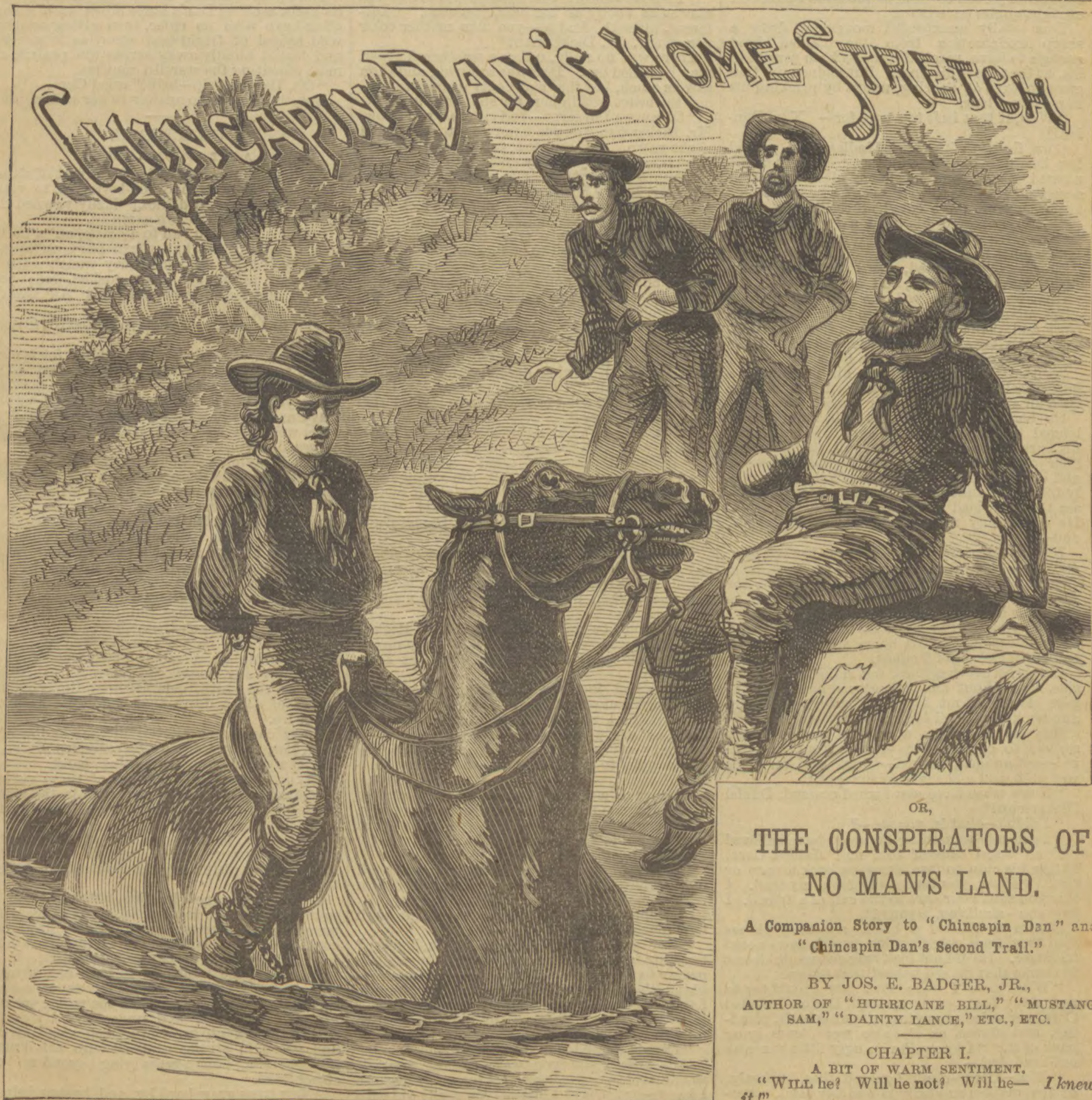
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OR,

THE CONSPIRATORS OF NO MAN'S LAND.

A Companion Story to "Chincapin Dan" and
"Chincapin Dan's Second Trail."

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "HURRICANE BILL," "MUSTANG
SAM," "DAINTY LANCE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BIT OF WARM SENTIMENT.

"Will he? Will he not? Will he— I knew
it!"

It was a prairie version of the fortune-telling
daisy, and Cora Mason covered her laughing

LOOKED HIS FIENDISH PLEASURE OVER HIS CONSUMMATED VENGEANCE UPON THE
DOOMED BOY.

lips with a gloved hand as that pleased ejaculation escaped them.

She was well out of sight as she sat on her spotted mustang just within the edge of the "timber island," peering through a leafy screen at the single horseman who was riding at right angles with the trail she had left in gaining that refuge only a few minutes before.

Would he notice that trail? Or, if noticed, would it be recognized? And, if recognized, would he follow those tracks?

These were the daisy-leaves Cora Mason was mentally plucking, and though she knew beforehand just what would happen, her cheeks grew more rosy, her blue eyes shone brighter as she saw Chincapin Dan quickly check his horse to bend low in the saddle, then gradually straighten up again as his keen gray eyes ran along the fresh trail, to pause upon the motto.

"The sharpest, truest, best eyes in all Texas!" Cora Mason was confidentially declaring, smothering a laugh of mischievous delight as she waited and watched. "Uncle Billy Breeze couldn't have—why, you Dan-i-el!"

Like one guided by pure instinct, the young horseman had turned toward the timber island, as though about to follow that trail; but before his steed had taken a dozen steps along it, Chincapin Dan jerked its head around and started off at right angles once more.

This totally unexpected movement drew a sharp exclamation from the maiden, loud enough to have reached far less keen ears than his, at that short distance. But Chincapin Dan gave no signs of hearing, unless by pricking his horse into a lope.

"Well, if that isn't too cool for— You Dan-i-el?"

Cora, flushed with puzzled indignation, pushed her horse through the bushes, reining in as she uttered that name in sharp, almost angered accents. Had its owner been twice as distant, he surely must have caught those sounds. Yet—he simply bowed his head a little lower and rode on a little faster!

"Dan-i-el Dick-er-man!"

Now really incensed, Cora sent her voice shrilly across the level, and as, even then, the retreat was not checked, she whipped forth a silver-mounted revolver from its morocco scabbard and pointing its muzzle in that direction, sent shot after shot in swift succession knocking up the dust close alongside the horseman.

At that Dan wrenched up his horse with a half-wheel, looking back toward the timber with an air of alarm: not for himself, though!

He had turned from that trail, though he so longed to follow it to the end. He had closed his ears to that clear, loved call, though every fiber of his honest body was tingling to answer and obey it. But, when he heard shots so closely following that shrill cry, he could not stop to see that the lead was humming past him alone. He could only think that *she* was in danger, and—

He saw Cora trotting her horse toward him, and with *her* eyes fixed upon his pale face, Chincapin Dan could not resume his flight: for flight it had been, as he knew only too well, as Cora was beginning to realize, at last.

"Did you—call me, Miss Mason?" he managed to stammer, sitting his horse very much like a culprit in looks and feelings.

Cora said never a word, but riding close to his side, reached out one little gloved hand, her fingers closing about his chin, forcing his face up and backward until their eyes fairly met.

She was frowning, now, and her blue eyes seemed to catch a tinge of color from her dark-red—not auburn, but red—curls. And her voice was both cold and sharp as she spoke.

"Since when have *you* turned coward, Daniel Dickerman?"

"I didn't—that is, you see—"

"I *did* see—something I'd never have believed had an angel himself told me!" flashed Cora, letting his chin go free, drawing back a pace or two. "I saw you turn away from my trail. I saw you shut your ears to the call of a friend. I saw you—*skulking*, Danny!"

Chincapin flashed a briefly appealing glance into that face, catching his breath as he noted its anger. He did not look long enough to detect the smile that played behind that frown.

"What have I done that *you* should try to run away from my very trail, Danny?" added Cora, her voice changing, growing soft, pleading, and almost as if there were tears lying back of it. "I know I'm an ugly little vixenish red-head, but—"

"Miss—Cora—*don't!*" gasped Dan, brokenly, as the maiden suddenly bowed her head, covering her face with her hands and shivering as with the force of her suppressed sobs.

"You used—to say you—*liked* the color and—and me, too!" sobbed Cora, swaying unsteadily in her saddle as the spotted mustang took a step or two nearer the fairly tall grass growing a little to one side.

Dan may be pardoned for thinking she was in danger of falling, perhaps, but surely he might have hindered that without using both his hands and arms? And yet—

"Miss—Cora, honey? If you only jest knowed—"

Cora dropped her hands and lifted her face; a charming face it was, too, despite the irregularity of features; and hardly a foot separated their lips; and hers were red as cherries, parting just enough to afford a momentary glimpse of small, even white teeth.

Chincapin Dan saw all this, and he must have been either more or less than man if—but instead of yielding to temptation, the silly fellow drew back a bit, his honest face growing paler than before.

"That was when I was a boy, Miss Mason," he managed to utter, still with that strange, painful change in voice and manner to which Cora felt she could never grow accustomed. "That was when *you* was a—*a* very young lady. An' then—times was dif'rent, then."

"I want to know!" ejaculated Cora, her cheeks almost as ruddy as her hair, just then. "Different, indeed! And so—you like neither color nor owner, Mr. Dickerman?"

There was no reply, unless a smothered groan may be called one. Dan was suffering and Cora saw as much, but that sight only seemed to harden the heart within her, for she spoke again:

"Of course I'm sorry—and all that, you know, Mr. Dickerman," as one hand rose to smother a slight yawn. "I counted you among my best friends, and was just silly enough to want to be the first to tell you that. Oh, *are* you acquainted with Mr. Harry Medsker?"

Dan gave a visible start, a half-wild look leaping into his eyes as they met those innocent blue orbs. He did not dare trust his tongue to answer, but he managed to nod assent.

"You do know Harry, then? I thought as much, but there's nothing like making sure, so—you'll come to the wedding, of course, Mr. Dickerman?"

"The wedding? Whose? Not—don't say *you're* goin' to marry—"

"Not marry?" almost indignantly interrupted the maiden, her wide eyes flashing brightly. "Indeed I shall, if I live long enough, Mr. Dickerman! That's what the girls were invited for! And father says—"

"I know—he's bin ag'in' me from the start, Cora! An' that's the matter why—"

"What's the matter why?" echoed Cora, frowning anew as, after all, the young man turned away his face and seemed about to seek safety in headlong flight from—what? "I do begin to think you've turned crazy, Daniel Dickerman! I just do!"

The next instant his sinewy arms were about her plump figure, almost lifting her from the saddle as his hungry lips fastened upon hers for a moment; then drew back to huskily utter in swift words:

"Reckon *I* be crazy, Cora, my love! Reckon I've bin crazy ever since the evenin'—you up an' kissed me 'fore all the folks, back yan' at Twin Ranch!"

"You had just saved my life, Danny, and—and I just *had* something to show—"

"I reckon I was lovin' ye even afore that, Cora, an' every breath I've drawn since then hes only made me wuss gone until—an' now you're goin' to marry 'nother—that Harry Medsker!"

Cora gave a great sigh as his close, almost fierce embrace relaxed, but there was a merry, mischievous sparkle in her blue eyes as he gazed anxiously into her face, to mutter:

"Did I hurt ye, little lady? I never—"

"The hardest work I ever experienced in all my life, but—Danny—you *really* mean it? You really love me like—like *that*?"

"I hain't got words to begin to tell ye nigh how much, Cora!"

"Nor actions, I'd begun to think, Danny," bursting into a merry laugh, yet leaning a little nearer to the youth as their horses lazily nibbled at the bunch-grass. "Do you know, Danny, I thought you'd *never* take a hint! And so—I lugged in Harry Medsker—by the ears—just to hurry you up a little—*so there!*"

"Cora!" gasped Dan, bewilderedly.

"Because I saw you were making yourself as miserable—as you were making me! Because I knew—or thought I knew—you really did care for me—a little, Danny!"

"A little, Cora?" his voice still more husky.

"An' me lovin' you harder than words could say, ef a man hed a tongue longer'n a river!"

Her little hands were on his shoulders, her blue eyes gazing keenly, earnestly into the gray depths of his own misty orbs, as though she would fain read all that lay in the brain back of them. And she saw something there that caused her to draw a long breath of happy satisfaction before she drew back, to murmur:

"Why didn't you speak out, Danny, without making me act so—so hideously bold! Why didn't you *tell* me, Danny?"

"Beca'se o' what your father said, Cora," was the gloomy reply, and the better to resist temptation Chincapin doggedly clasped both hands behind him. "Beca'se he more'n hinted that he'd heap sight rather I wouldn't come nigh ye so often. Beca'se he 'lowed I wasn't fitten to be comp'ny 'long o' his daughter. That's jest why, Cora!"

"But, father—"

Only so far, for the spotted mustang gave a shrill squeal of mingled pain and terror as it jerked its nose back from a bunch of grass, a huge rattlesnake fastened to its muzzle, partly by its curved fangs, partly by being caught by the long curb-bit, its tail giving an ugly skir-r-r as it whirled about in angry coils.

The bitten mustang lashed out fiercely with its heels, sending Dan's horse down in a struggling heap with its rider, then giving another wild squeal of frightened agony as it wheeled and dashed blindly away across the prairie, almost unseating the startled maiden.

"Oh, Danny, help—help!" cried Cora.

But, there came no answer to her wild appeal.

CHAPTER II.

A BIT OF COOL NERVE.

"It'd be simply perfection—this sort of thing—if one had a drop of oh-be-joyful, to wash away the crumbs, Old Nick!" lazily yawned the more youthful of the two campers.

"Which a drap'd run to a bottle, an' a bottle to the dregs o' the hull pizen bar'l, an' that—waal, you'd let up when they wasn't even a smell left to hanker over, mebbe, lad; but, whar'd our leetle game be? Eh? An' whar'd we be? Eh?"

"I'd be happy, and you'd be croaked, instead of croaking!"

"Jest so. Which is why I didn't fetch none o' the stuff 'long. Which is why I s'arched ye all over 'fore we set out. Which is the reason I made ye kiss the book an' take your solemn 'davy as how you wouldn't even *think* that way ontel we'd played our keerds an' raked in the stakes, Josey-Ed!"

"Eh?" giving a slight start, then sinking back into his lazy attitude, with a low, bubbling laugh. "Oh! my new name?"

"Your old name, breshed up fer new, Josey-Ed," gravely nodded the elder, an owl-like look of reproof in his little eyes. "The name that was given unto ye by your pap an' your mam, when ye was a weenty bit of a squealer: fer squealer, an' kicker, an' yowler you raaly was, them long ago days, Josey-Ed! I never met up 'long 'ith sech another kid fer racketin' them ways—I jest never *did*, now!"

"Which may be the reason why I'm so partial to going on a racket of another description, now my beard is grown, Old Nick!" drawled the youth, complacently fingering the streak of silken down that shadowed his short upper lip.

Their camp was pitched in the shadow of a long, low, rocky ledge which extended as far as the eye could reach on either hand. Not a bluff, or range of hills, but one of those curious formations so often to be met with in the southwest, locally termed *mesas*, though hardly with accuracy.

It was as though one-half of the mighty stretch of prairie had dropped some thirty feet, without disturbing the level of either portion.

Coming from one direction, nothing could be seen of the other level until actually upon the escarpment. Facing the opposite way, one could only surmise what lay beyond that long line of dingy rocks and grass-dotted dirt.

Just here, the location was both comfortable and pleasant to gaze upon, for the generous spring gushing from beneath the rocks, spreading its favors over and under the dry earth, caused the grass to grow in a thick sward, fresh and green, in strong contrast with the dingy, dusty-seeming bunch-grass lying beyond and on either hand.

A few trees grew hard by, and bushes helped to freshen the spot selected as a camping-ground by these two wayfarers, both of whom

have an important part to play in this sketch of real life.

"Josey-Ed," as his portly companion persisted in calling him, or Gordon Grable as he had better known himself, was still in his teens, though a careless guess would easily have given him his majority, thanks to the lines which a free, somewhat reckless life had engraved on his darkly handsome face.

He was a little above the average height, of slender build and light weight. Just now, as he reclined indolently on the little grassy slope, in the shade, there was a look of effeminacy about him; but this would vanish as soon as he put himself in motion. Then one could note the strength, allied with a certain pantherish activity, which would make him an awkward adversary in a death-grapple.

His hair was black as the fabled raven's wing, worn rather long, the silken ends curling in graceful rings of jet. His eyes were large and—just now—sleepy-seeming; but they could flash like fire in time of need.

His forehead was high and rather narrow—his whole face was narrow, for that matter—yet few could say he was not a handsome youth, after a dark, Spanish fashion.

There was a tinge of bronze as of the warm sun in his cheeks, and on his long, pointed chin, as on his sinewy throat, but no other color relieved the even pallor of his face. Thin and smooth though his skin seemed, not a trace of warm blood showed through it, then or ever. When in the hottest rage, he simply turned whiter.

His garb was that of one used to prairie life of later days—of fine material, but adapted to hard usage and exposure to the elements.

A belt of silk webbing encircled his round waist, supporting a brace of revolvers, a knife, and fixed ammunition snugly resting in their tiny leathern loops.

On his feet were high-heeled boots of fine leather, heavily spurred, as a matter of course.

Close by his head lay a broad-brimmed hat, of fawn-colored felt, and near it stood a Winchester rifle.

In strong contrast was his present companion and mentor, "Neutral Nick," as he called himself, after that strip of land over which, at that date, "No Man" had or could claim jurisdiction.

Neutral Nick was nearly as broad as he was long, and even thicker than he was broad! A king among fat men!

Provided one viewed him equatorially, that is to say, for Nature had hardly cut him out for a behemoth, at starting.

"Ef I was 'lotted that way, why wasn't I laid out on diff'rent lines, I'd ax ye?" Neutral Nick was wont to pathetically ask, in rare moments of confidence. "Why wasn't I built a'cordin'? Why was I made so durn condensed at both ends, ef I was 'tended fer to be so monstrous big into the middle o' me? Why? I ax ye that, pardner! Why?"

His head was almost ludicrously small at top, all the more so because his hair had failed him, leaving his cranium bald as ever an infant could boast. His forehead was actually peaked, his face growing broader as the lines ran lower, until his chin showed a triple roll of flabby fat, covered with a straggling crop of bristles, white as new milk. His fishy-blue eyes were so small as to be almost imperceptible, unless emotion or interest aided his muscles in lifting the heavy lids wider.

His shoulders were narrow, and his chest seemed almost three-cornered, his stomach swelled so abruptly. His girth was simply enormous, his hips something abnormal. But then, as above, his figure rapidly declined, until his legs looked far too feeble to support his bulk, while his boots would almost have fitted Gordon Grable himself.

He was armed in much the same fashion as his young mate, with knife, pistols, and magazine rifle.

Two horses were grazing placidly at a slight distance from the low-burning camp-fire, and one glance at the animals was enough to decide their particular ownership; the trim, Arab-looking black belonged to Gordon, while nothing less than that bony, many-angled monster could have proved equal to standing up under Neutral Nick's mountain of flesh through a long day's ride.

Neutral Nick heaved a mighty sigh, slowly licking his thick lips as he sunk his knife deep through the sward, as the briefest method of cleaning it. His little eyes beamed half regretfully upon the fragments left from their meal, and his free left hand mechanically sought the region embraced by that vast belt, delicately

sounding there as though in search of more room; but vainly!

"They ain't 'nough to save, but they's too mighty much fer to see go to waste. So—Josey-Ed!"

A sleepy grunt answered back, and Neutral Nick spoke again:

"Mebbe you'd best cl'ar up the table, pard, fer—"

"Just wait until you catch me, Old Nick!"

"But, didn't we 'gree as how each was to do his sheer?"

"Oh—that was when you had me on your own ground, Old Nick," drawled the youth, turning to rest on an elbow the better to gaze into the fat face of his fatter companion. "Now—I am on my native heath I believe, pardner?"

"Your own—which?"

"This stretch belongs to the Townsend estate, doesn't it? Good enough, then!" with a lazy nod, as he dropped back to his former position. "Play nigh your own self, Old Nick! I'm your master, now!"

"Good Lawd!" gasped the fat man, throwing up his hands in silent dismay.

"Just now I'm too lazy to run away from even your tongue, Nick," was the placid addition. "But, it's about your last chance, so if you have any further instructions to give me, better open up while that chance lingers. I'll soon be too high and mighty to hold equal converse with a cowboy or sheep-herd. See?"

"An' me jest with the makin' or the ruinatin' of him onto the lone tongue o' me!" gasped Neutral Nick, as he set about repacking the "grub" in a haversack hard by. "An' me, able fer to kick over his hopes an' 'pectations like a— Hellow!"

The youth sprang to his feet like one suddenly galvanized, but it was not because of that abrupt ejaculation, though beyond a doubt it found birth in the same cause: the quick pounding of hoofs echoing down through the solid earth and rock-bank above their heads.

And, almost at the same instant, there came a faint, far-away cry—the shriek of a mortal being in great pain or greater terror.

"Quick, Elephant!" cried the youth, snatching his rifle and nimbly scaling the steep bank before them. "Follow, if your fat'll let ye! There's music in the air up yonder!"

"Hold on, ye pesky hot-head!" panted Nick, floundering forward with outstretched arms, as though bent on holding his companion back by main force. "Don't ye dast to git muxed up into no sech scrape 'long o' others, when they's so much a-hangin' into the balance an'— Ow-couch-ugh!"

He tripped over a slippery rock, plunging forward and almost standing on his head for an instant, then rocking back and forth with his belt for a pivot, until he managed to roll over on his back.

The young man did not even cast a backward look, but breasted the steep with an agility and resolution in strong contrast with the lazy languor he had before exhibited. Now he was all fire, all animation, all life and energy.

For some subtle instinct warned him that much depended on his promptness of action, though that fear-shaken voice was silent, and the noise of his own impetuous rush drowned the still distant clatter of hoofs.

A mountain goat could scarcely have made better time up the bank of the mesa, and then, with hardly more than his head and shoulders showing above the level, Gordon Grable came to an abrupt halt, staring wide-eyed at the spectacle which greeted his vision.

Not two hundred yards away, and headed direct for the bank where he stood in partial concealment, came a horse and rider at breakneck speed, seemingly unaware of the perilous drop which surely awaited them both in case that pace should be maintained a few more seconds!

"A girl—runaway!" ejaculated Gordon, springing up to the level and leaping forward a couple of paces, pausing to fling up his arms with a shout of warning.

His voice was heard, even if his figure had not already been seen, for quickly there came floating an answering cry:

"I can't—bridle broken—stop him!"

Gordon saw as much now, and the next instant he saw more! Saw that hideous snake coiling around the head of the maddened mustang!

He knew that a dozen strong men could not have stopped that fear-crazed beast from plunging over the bank. There was but one chance—a terribly risky one where such speed was maintained! And that chance he took on the instant, crying out sharply:

"Ready to jump—I'll try to catch ye!"

The horse was dashing straight for him, now hardly fifty yards away, and leveling his rifle, he sent shot after shot full into that foam-flecked chest. Yet on the crazed horse plunged, falling at the sixth shot only, though each one had sped true to its aim. And falling, its fair rider was hurled directly toward the edge of the mesa.

CHAPTER III.

PLAYING HIS FIRST CARD.

It was a rare bit of cool nerve on his part, for the crazy mustang was plunging direct for the spot where he stood, and though those foam-flecks were turning red with the hot blood that spouted from its chest, the poor creature did not seem to hear the shots or feel the wounds.

The lever rattled, the empty shells whizzed through the air, the cartridges exploded, the bullets grouping themselves until a palm might have covered all of the six holes. Straight on dashed the mustang, never swerving to one side nor the other, until even the rifleman felt that he must almost certainly go over the brink in company with horse and rider.

Yet even then he disdained to dart aside, though the runaway was now so near that even in death it might prove itself deathly.

Through the blue smoke of his own creation, he saw the coming end, and, dropping his rifle, held out his arms, crying sharply:

"Jump! I'll save you! Jump, as he falls!"

With its heart cut to ribbons by the bullets, the spotted mustang fell in a heap, hardly twice its own length from where the youth stood, but that encouraging shout had been comprehended, and clearing herself from stirrup and horn, Cora Mason came flying through the air, straight for the arms of Gordon Grable!

He caught her, trying to brace himself against the shock, though just then thinking far more of saving this fair stranger from injury than of his own safety. Tried, and succeeded, so far as Cora was concerned, though the heavy shock sent him staggering backward.

He felt the dry earth crumbling beneath his foot, and feeling as by instinct that both could not be saved, he flung his last effort into saving the weaker. Pushing, rather than casting, Cora backward, he lost his own balance, falling backward and downward.

Neutral Nick gave a hoarse cry of alarm as he saw this from his position half way up the slope, but he had time for no more: Gordon came spinning downward, and though Nick desperately strove to check his fall, both rolled heavily over the rocks to the level below.

Gasping, groaning, spluttering as he tried to free his mouth from the dirt forced into it by his fall, Nick scrambled to his hands and knees, waddling awkwardly toward the nearest cover as he blinked upward in search of the enemy whom he felt certain must be preparing to make victory complete.

"Good Lawd!" he puffed, trying to flatten his rotund carcass under lee of the boulder, groping for a revolver with one hand while he dug at his eyes with the other. "Bu'sted! Jest bu'sted—wide open! An' sech a pie as that was! An' me—an' him—an' it jest ready fer our ketchin' onto! An' now—"

The young man had been saved broken bones, if nothing worse, by taking the first drop on that cushion of fat and flesh, though he had received many an ugly knock and shock as together they completed the descent. He had struck the level first, with Neutral Nick falling squarely across his body, driving the breath from his lungs, which, added to the force of his own fall, for the moment deprived him of his senses.

But he quickly rallied, and it was his short, husky cry caused Nick to break off his lamentations with a joyful, yet incredulous grunt.

"Good Lawd! Ef he ain't 'live, then I don't—"

"Look to—girl, you fool!" panted his companion, trying to rise, but falling back with swimming brain and blinding sight.

"An' git shot—like you be?"

"Fool!" with another rally. "Just a runaway horse. I killed it. She fell—look to her, I say!"

"Then they didn't nobody else shoot? They ain't nobody else up y'en'way, jest, honin' fer to make a skimmer out o' me?"

Nick was using his dusty eyes as best he might, while huskily pouring out these questions, gaining courage with each moment that passed without bringing bullets or marksmen over the bank above.

"You pussy old coward—no!" angrily cried Gordon, rising to a sitting posture, though forced to clasp his head tightly with both hands, to hold that whirling brain under control. "Go see—"

"I'll lick you out of—your boots, if you don't hurry."

"Jest watch me begin to fly, Josey-Ed!" puffed the fat man, taking heart from that assurance, but moving toward his young mate rather than attempting that difficult ascent. "I'll float up yender wuss'n a b'lcon, when I oncet git started!"

"Start—now, confound you!"

"How many holes did they putt into ye, Josey-Ed? How many times did they kill ye afore—Stiddy, you!" making a swift clutch at the unsteady fingers that sought to whip forth a knife. "I'm yer best fri'nd, Josey-Ed, an' ef I lose my light, you lose your pie—sure!"

His grip was flung off and the young man rose to his feet; only to drop down again with an angry cry. Though no bones were broken, that endlong fall and awkward series of bounces had sadly shaken him up, and he was not yet fit for service, anxious though he was on the fair stranger's account.

Nick, once more his usual self, quickly assured himself that nothing serious was the matter with his friend, and then said:

"I'm goin' up to look, Josey-Ed, but, mind ye, lad! Bresh up your wits an' don't mouth a word that ye don't fust show to me! We're gittin' right into the thick of it, an' they's a mighty heap 'pendin' onto the takin' of the fust trick—a most mighty monstrous heap, Josey!"

With an activity hardly to be looked for in one of his clumsy build and awkwardly distributed weight, Nick clambered up the slope, taking only his pistols with him, since both hands were required for climbing. He aimed at a point some few rods from where Gordon had broken the edge of the mesa, and something which came to his ears as he neared the level above caused him to show caution in peering over.

He saw the dead horse, lying in an awkward heap. It had fallen on its head, snapping its neck and crushing the rattlesnake into ragged bits.

He saw Cora just struggling to her feet, reaching her hands toward Chincapin Dan, who was running swiftly toward her, his face streaked with dust, but otherwise pale as death.

His horse had fallen with him, its leg broken short off by the first wild kicking of the spotted mustang as it felt the poison-laden fangs pierce its muzzle. He had been partly caught under his steed, but quickly freeing himself, had raced at lung-bursting speed in the direction taken by the runaway, half-crazed by his fears for Cora's safety, for like a flash, there came to his brain the memory of the mesa straight ahead.

He had run as he never ran before, but the crazed mustang distanced him, though he was near enough to catch those swift reports—near enough to know that they could not have come from the little revolver which Cora habitually carried with her while on the prairie. But he had been too far away to see what took place on the brink of the mesa, and he had dreaded the very worst until he saw Cora herself raising up to reach her appealing hands toward him!

Nick only paused long enough to see the lovers meet, and to take one square look at the youthful cowboy's face and figure; then he turned and bumped down the steep bank, wildly gesticulating to Gordon Grable, who was now on his feet, rapidly recovering from his fall.

"What's up, you crazy balloon?" he sharply cried, starting forward to meet his mentor for the time being. "Don't tell me—the girl's all right!"

"Huggin' an' bein' hugged— Good Lawd!" spluttered the fat man, catching his toe and toppling forward, to turn end for end over a hummock of dirt.

Under ordinary circumstances he would have been half disabled, but just now little short of a broken neck could have disposed of him until the warning words were uttered and emphasized.

"Don't talk—let me tell—fust trick!" he spluttered, catching Gordon by a leg as the young man attempted to pass him by, to scale the bank and see for himself what had so greatly agitated the monstrosity.

Gordon freed himself with a kick, and though his brain still dizzily whirled, and his many bruises began to tingle and smart, he lost little time in gaining the crest, just as Cora and Chincapin turned that way, to discover what had become of the one who had so gallantly saved her from what had seemed like certain death.

"Hugging—him?" flashed across Gordon's brain, and his lips curled as he glanced swiftly over that cowboy-like figure, now dirty and tattered, thanks to the fall of his crippled horse.

"The old fool!"

He had time only for that one glance, for Cora

recognized her preserver, and sprung toward him with a glad cry as she saw that he was not seriously injured.

Neither she nor Gordon knew just what was said, during those first few moments. Both felt very grateful: Cora for being saved, and Gordon for having been granted the chance to rescue her. For, somehow, he began to feel that life would hardly have been worth living, if serious harm had come to this red-haired angel!

But Chincapin unwittingly brought him back to earth by pushing forward to utter his thanks for the great service. And staring into his freckled countenance, Gordon, once more his usual cool, almost insolent self, slowly drawled:

"What were you doing, my man, that you didn't hinder it? You wear a cowboy rig, but you must have forgotten the cowboy grit. Lucky I'm not your master, or you'd be hunting another situation this minute!"

"Don't—Danny—Mr. Dickerman did all man could do," hurriedly interposed Cora, flushing and paling by turns. "My horse crippled his, and he couldn't help it."

"Never mind, Miss Mason," said Dan, turning away as he added: "I'll see if I cain't git a hoss, ef you'd rather ride then walk back home."

"I have horses—you Nick!" sharply cried Gordon, turning toward the mesa, just in time to see the fat man leading their animals up a not very distant trail to the left.

"Comin', boss! Jest a-flyin', like a b'lcon! Git up, you critters!"

Then, with only a husky gasp by way of warning, Gordon sunk to the ground, a hand pressed tightly over the region of his heart, a faint smile lighting up his handsome face as he returned the frightened look given him by Cora.

"It isn't—only a trifle, lady," he muttered, huskily. "The shock of my tumble, and—Nick!"

"Good Lawd! Don't crowd—give 'im air—heaps o' air!" the man spluttered, rushing forward and kneeling beside his comrade.

"Make out I'm all bunged up, Nick," swiftly whispered Gordon, his lips close to that ear. "I'm going to her home—going, mind! Play in with my notion, or I'll kick over the traces—sure!"

He seemed almost swooning, just then, and only showed signs of returning vitality when Neutral Nick, fearing still worse, had exaggerated his hurts sufficiently to suit his capricious young master's fancy.

Cora asked Dan to shift her saddle to one of the horses, then, as she knelt beside Gordon, partly supporting his head, she asked anxiously:

"Where do you feel—where are you hurt the worst, my poor friend?"

"Right here—shot clear through—by your bright eyes!" murmured Gordon, pressing her little hand ardently above his heart!

Cora blushed furiously, springing to her feet and turning away, hardly knowing whether she felt most pleased or angry, for she could not mistake his meaning. But Danny was too busy to notice her confusion, and in the little bustle which attended their getting away: with Gordon perched in Neutral Nick's saddle, and she riding Gordon's nag: the little lady quickly regained her usual composure.

And before the journey was half completed, she broke away to join two horsemen who came in sight from behind a timber island; one her father, the other Colonel Jo Townsend, of the Twin Ranch, where Chincapin Dan made his home. And before the parties fairly united, Cora had told her story, and was eager to introduce her rescuer to her father. But—

"To think!" with a charming blush. "I never even asked his name!"

"To the best of my belief, it is Joseph Edward Townsend."

CHAPTER IV.

A PENITENT RASCAL.

COLD and clear the tones, and the speaker gazed straight into the surprised countenance of Colonel Townsend, much as though he anticipated an angry denial from that quarter.

So peculiar was his manner that, added to the name, all present gazed at the speaker in surprise for a moment, thus giving him time to add:

"If you have any doubts on that point, Colonel Townsend, my old friend and guardian, here, no doubt can settle them. Eh, Nick?"

"Ef it's Kunnel Jo, o' the Twin Ranch—"

"I live there. That is what I am called," bowed the ranchero.

"An' you hed a twin brother which they called Major Ed?"

"I had. My brother is dead. But what am I to understand by your questions, sir? Who are you? Who is this—young gentleman?"

"Tell him, Nick," crisply nodded the young man. "As well have it over with first as last."

"Good Lawd!" groaned the fat man, puffing and blowing like one who has just discovered his great weariness. "An' me 'thout sca'cely wind 'nough fer to breathe, let 'lone talk! An' me—"

Colonel Jo sent his horse forward until he was face to face with the younger man. Their eyes met, and neither flinched for the greater part of a minute, during which interval none of the others spoke. Nick seemed too badly frightened, the others too greatly perplexed by this strange episode.

"Which do I favor most; Major Ed, or my—his wife?" slowly asked the youth, a faint smile coming into his pale face.

"Do you claim her as your—mother?"

Those trim shoulders gave a shrug, and the smile deepened. But the voice was cool, even careless as it added:

"Nick swears I have a perfect right to make such a claim; but whether I exercise it or no—quien sabe? That depends!"

Colonel Jo abruptly turned away, giving his fiery steed a dig of the spurs that sent it off in a swift run, and though its master quickly brought it down to a more moderate pace, while the rest of the party followed after, he did not rejoin them for some minutes.

When he did do so, it was to say in low, grave tones:

"We'll say no more until we get to Mason's. Then—make good your claims, my man!" turning a keen, sharp glance toward Neutral Nick. "And don't forget that, if true, those claims affect the richest cattle and stock ranch in all Texas!"

A cold blanket seemed to have fallen over the entire party, with the sole exception of the young man who had so queerly announced his real name. For the time being he seemed to have gotten the better of his bruises, and though he had a very silent auditor, his nimble tongue rattled gayly on, seemingly content at having Cora for an audience.

The little company fell into pairs, Mason and the colonel riding on in advance, Cora and her rescuer following, with Chincapin Dan and Neutral Nick bringing up the rear, on foot.

Colonel Jo's face was strangely pale, and his dark eyes stared straight ahead, with the peculiar, unseeing look of one whose thoughts are strong and troubled.

Why should they be? Howard Mason asked himself this, as they rode along. And, though he veiled his eyes as much as possible, he kept studying that bronzed, manly countenance, trying hard to read what lay back of it.

The story of the past was fairly familiar to him. He had often heard how, years ago, when but an infant, the son of Major Edward Townsend had been stolen from home, as was supposed at the time, by a bitter personal enemy. And he knew, too, that the kidnapped child had been reported dead.

Was that report false? Was this young man indeed the son of Edward Townsend? If so—then indeed a glorious future awaited him.

Neutral Nick puffed and sweat, lumbering along over the plain more like one bound for execution than one who sees a rich reward awaiting his disinterested services.

And Chincapin Dan neither asked nor answered questions, though the fat man did find breath to ask a few by the way. He was thinking over what had that day happened: thinking of the past, the present, the future—looking darker and more dismal than ever, now this darkly handsome stranger had come upon the scene so romantically.

"Her pap was sot ag'inst me afore, but now—"

The minutes which passed before Neutral Nick could reach the comfortable home of the Masons, was passed by Colonel Townsend in collecting his own thoughts, and he was cold and grave as he bowed the fat man into a room assigned them by the host.

"Please remain, Mason, and you, Miss Cora," he said, as both father and daughter moved toward the door. "There is nothing to conceal, if only the truth is to be spoken. Now—your name, sir?"

"Neutral Nick, o' No Man's Land!" said the fat man, nervously mopping his dome-shaped head, glancing nervously from face to face be-

fore adding: "An' I jest wish't she wasn't! Or—Kunnel Jo!" desperately facing the ranchero, his fat lips quivering. "Say you'll fer-git what I did then—'long o' what I'm goin' fer to do now! Say you won't—"

"Tell your story, Neutral Nick," was the grave interruption. "I promise to listen without an interruption. I promise to reward you as you deserve, provided you confine yourself strictly to the truth."

"Out with it, Nick!" encouragingly nodded the youthful claimant. "You simply have a confession to make. We are claiming nothing, as yet. Maybe we never shall—that depends on how your story is received."

Thus encouraged, Neutral Nick began his story, or confession, rather, since what he had to say best deserves such a title. But to follow his speech line by line would consume far too much space. At the start he was too uneasy to put his meaning into concise shape.

Edward and Joseph Townsend were twins, who fought together in the same regiment during the Civil War, coming out at the end, first and second in command. And when peace once more reigned over the land, the brothers settled down in Texas, starting a stock farm or ranch.

They prospered far beyond their most sanguine expectations, and soon took rank with the richest stock-growers in the State.

Both were married. Joseph, the elder, was first to take a wife, and had two sons when Edward brought home his bride.

Two children were born to Edward, or "Major Ed," as nearly everybody called him—a daughter and a son, little more than one year dividing them. Then, when the son, the "baby," was hardly more than twelve months old, a terrible blow fell upon that happy household. Both children were stolen away, and the closest, keenest, most persistent search failed to discover the kidnappers or to recover the stolen children.

All that could be learned by the almost distracted parents came in vague rumors—rumors that said an old enemy, named Wilder Hawkings, had stolen the children as the surest means of torturing those he had learned to hate so intensely, so madly.

"An' that was the Gospel truth, sir, boss," huskily added Neutral Nick, with a nervous glance over a shoulder at the open air. "Wilder Hawkings done it—he jest *did*!"

"I know that much," coldly spoke up Colonel Jo. "He gave one of the children to a man named Todd Dickerman, paying him for its keep. He intended to keep the girl under his control until she was old enough to contract a legal marriage with his son, one Black Hawk Bruno. But just as he was about to complete his dastardly plans, Todd Dickerman relented—or discovered the truth, rather—and took means to restore Elma to her relatives."

Neutral Nick listened intently, then nodded assent.

"I know. I hearn as much. An' that helped turn my face the right way—to'rds the light, glory be to—ahem! That an' gittin' 'ligion, Kunnel Jo! An' so—'waal, I made up my mind fer to fight the devil the best I knowed how, but afore I could do much—'waal, word come that the devil was dead!"

"Meaning Wilder Hawkings?" sharply demanded Townsend, leaning forward and gazing keenly, almost fiercely into the man's face.

Neutral Nick nodded assent, drawing a long breath, as though he had just begun to fairly realize the joyous truth.

"In Wichita, Kansas. Smallpox. Any cleaner death wasn't fitten fer sech a turrible sinner! Amen!"

"Steady, Nick!" frowned the young claimant, rightly thinking that his guardian could only injure their cause by taking such a plainly hypocritical course. "Tell your story without comments, sir!"

"Nur I wasn't so mighty much better, them days!" sighed Nick, with meek resignation in face, voice, and manner. "Fer—I'm 'most 'shamed fer to say it, Kunnel Jo—fer I was one o' them cusses as helped Wild Hawk tote off the kids—I jest *was*!"

"Go on," coldly nodded Townsend, betraying no emotion.

"He knowed they would be a mighty hot hunt fer the kids, did Wild Hawk, an' so he did what he could to blind the trail. He give me the weentiest kid—the little buck, ye understand? An' he said ef I ever lost sight o' it, or didn't hev it to show up when he come 'round fer it—'waal, skinnin' alive wouldn't begin to tell it!"

"That was the way I begun to go to the devil, sir, boss. Wild Hawk paid me big

money, an' I tuck to drinkin' hard. An' then—'waal, it jest sot me crazy, like, the bad whisky! I tuck to lickin' the ole 'oman—my wife, ye understand? I'd git drunk nigh every day. An' then—'waal, my ole 'oman stud it long's she knowed how, but one night she lit out, fer good an' all! An' she tuck the kid with her, too!"

"When I come to find it out, the shock sobered me off, like a jedge, sir, boss, fer what ef Wild Hawk should come to ax me whar was the kid, afore I could ketch it back ag'in? An' so—I jest come mighty nigh runnin' the hull kentry through a sifter, I was so turrible eager to git 'em back ag'in! But I couldn't. An' then, one day, my ole 'oman she come back home, an' 'lowed, she did, that the kid hed bin stole from her when she wasn't thinkin', one time. An' then—'twas afore I'd ketched 'ligion, ye onderstand, Kunnel Jo? So we 'lowed a lie, well stuck to, 'uld be heap better'n tellin' the naked truth. An' so, when one day Wild Hawk come that way, axin' fer to hev a look at the kid, we up an' told him the kid was gone—hed tumbled into the river, an' was cold when we fished it out. An' my ole 'oman she fell to cryin', like wimmen kin, so easy, an' I hed tuck mighty good keer to ketch the drap, fu'st off. An' so—'waal, Wild Hawk jest cussed, an' swaltered the lie."

"When he went away, we 'lowed as mebbe we'd live longer ef we'd make a shift, an' so my ole 'oman an' me, we struck out fer the Neutral Strip, changin' our names at the same time."

"From that day on I never hearn tell of or set eyes onto Wild Hawk, ontel I l'arned that one o' the two kids hed found its way hum ag'in, 'long o' old Todd Dickerman."

"Did this Dickerman help steal the children?" sharply asked Howard Mason, paying no attention to Cora's indignant ejaculation.

"He never did," decidedly replied Neutral Nick. "They was jest me an' Wild Hawk an' one other—he's dead, now, an' I don't want to name his name."

"You need not name him. Finish your story," said Townsend.

"As I was sayin', when we hearn 'bout Todd Dickerman's little gal, my wife up an' told me how she'd fooled me so fur. She hedn't lost the kid. It wasn't stole from her, but she jest hid it 'long o' some o' her 'lations, to spite me an' Wild Hawk. An' then she tuck sick, an' afore she died she tole me how an' whar I could find the boy—now gittin' pritty well growed up. An' then, when I kivered her up, an' ketched 'ligion, as I told ye, I got to studyin' an' 'pentin'. An' so—jest then I heard o' Wild Hawk dyin' o' small-pox. An' so I set out to git the boy—knowin' him by the tattoo-mark Wild Hawk holped me putt onto his shoulder—an' fetch him back to his kin once more!"

Neutral Nick drew a long breath, lifting his head and gazing meekly, yet triumphantly, about the circle of interested faces. If not exactly proud, he looked like one who felt he deserved a reward rather than punishment.

"And this young man is that stolen child?" slowly asked Townsend. "Are you ready to take oath to that effect, Neutral Nick?"

"Hev ye got ary Bible handy, Kunnel Jo?"

CHAPTER V.

HOW CORA PAID HER DEBTS.

FOR almost the first time since beginning his story, or confession, Neutral Nick squarely encountered those keen black eyes, smacking his thick lips suggestively as he asked that question. And never before had he looked so nearly honest and sincere.

Had he spoken nothing more than the truth? Was this handsome young man indeed the baby boy over whose untimely death so many bitter tears had fallen? Had Wilder Hawkings been cheated in this, as in the other instance? Was this the end of his long-delayed revenge?

Thoughts akin to these were chasing one another through the brain of the stately ranchero, and his grave look was so steady that Neutral Nick may have been excusable in mistaking it.

"I jest axed, Kunnel Jo, reckonin' as how each man 'lows his'n is mebbe the best, ye see," he said, with an apologetic bow, one pudgy hand crowding itself into his bosom, to come forth again with a buckskin-enveloped package. "Mebbe it'd save trouble ef—the couple o' us, boss, hain't bin seprated never oncet sence I fu'st ketched 'ligion!"

Removing the yellow envelope, Neutral Nick laid bare a small Testament, and he was lifting this toward his puckered-up lips with a flourish, when Townsend reached out and checked the action.

"Wait—not now!" a touch of harshness in his tones.

"But ef it'll help—"

"If you are lying, such an oath would not choke you. If you are telling the simple truth, such an oath can add little weight to your evidence. With so much at stake—"

"Give way, Nick," sharply interposed the young claimant, then his voice growing cold as grave, he turned toward Colonel Townsend to add: "The claim is made for, not, by, me, sir. The name I have worn up to this day, has served me well enough so far; it can serve me for the rest of my life—*will* serve me, before I *fight* for a share of the name you wish to deny your brother's child!"

"I do not deny your right to share that name, young sir," was the grave response, their dark eyes meeting squarely. "I would give a year out of the lease of life remaining mine, to fairly prove you entitled to bear that name!"

"It kin be done—jest as *easy*!" exploded Neutral Nick, with an oily chuckle, a button flying from his shirt as a fat hand plunged hastily into that natural receptacle for secrets. "I've got papers—papers ontel you cain't rest, Kunnel Jo!"

"Keep them for the present, sir," with a swift recovery of his former gravity. "They will be safe in your possession until I am composed enough to examine them with the care they deserve. For, young man," turning toward the claimant with a faint smile lighting up his bronzed face for an instant, "of course you understand that where so many and such important interests are at stake, it would be almost criminal on my part to take anything for granted?"

The one addressed contented himself with bowing assent, but Howard Mason, who had been listening with almost breathless interest, exclaimed:

"I must say, colonel, it sounds mighty reasonable, the way he tells the story! And if it should prove true—just think of it, man!"

"The truth is mighty an' will prevail!" quoted Neutral Nick, with much gusto, his little eyes peering over the top of his Testament, much as though their owner was reading a text. "Ef I'd only thunk that way 'fore I did! Ef conviction hed lit down onto the evil sperret o' me heap sight sooner! Ef—"

"Steady, Nick!" frowningly warned his companion. "Remember we are here only on sufferance, and—"

"Welcome as rain in July, sir!" declared Mason, catching his hand and shaking it vigorously as he added: "You saved the life of my little girl, sir, and that makes you *my* friend—my honored friend, sir! And I'm free to confess that I believe every word you've said this day, sir! I just *know* you're the son of Major Ed! Just *know* it, sir!"

"No one will be happier to have that belief confirmed than I will, neighbor," bowed Townsend, with the ghost of a smile, that left his face graver than before, as he added: "Until that confirmation is gained, of course Mr.—these two gentlemen, will be the honored guests of Major Ed's own house."

"Of course, if you— Ah!"

The young man rose quickly from his chair, in acceptance, but only to stagger back with a quick, short gasp, a hand flying up to his left breast.

Cora uttered a little cry. Mason caught the shivering form in his strong arms, lowering it into the chair, his florid face betraying his deep solicitude.

For a few seconds the youth remained limp, pale as a corpse, but then he seemed to rally, forcing a smile as he panted:

"Really, I beg pardon. But—I'm afraid I'm not—quite so strong as—I reckon!"

"That settles it, colonel!" instantly declared Mason. "Townsend must stay with us. We'll nurse him back to condition, and be more than glad of the chance, for it was in saving my little girl that he got hurt—eh, Cora?"

"If I might—don't let me put you out, dear sir," faintly murmured the patient, yet able to steal a sly glance toward the maiden.

But Mason would listen to no further objections, and even Colonel Jo seemed not a little relieved by the turn matters had taken. With so much fresh food for thought, he was willing enough to be left unincumbered. And especially by a guest who occupied such an anomalous position as did this unlooked-for claimant.

Meanwhile, Neutral Nick had softly stolen out of the room, and noting this, Townsend followed after, to quietly say:

"You are quite well enough to go with me, sir. We can look over your papers this evening, in quietness."

"Ef you say so, Kunnel Jo—sart'inly, sir!"

spluttered the fat man, but with a doleful weariness in his tones as he added: "Reckon I kin stan' it, boss, ef I hev to, but—I ain't nigh so pient as I used to was, when I hedn't so much to tote 'round wharever I went! Fer they was a time—they was a time when I knew what a waist was like! They was a time when I used to make a shadder like a hour-glass, or the one side of a saw-buck! Mebbe you wouldn't b'lieve it, boss, but many's the time I've knowed young an' skittish gals to up'n ax my ole'oman ef I didn't use to w'ar cossets—cossets, sirl! I was so trim an' weenty 'bout the middle o' me! An' now—big in the middle an' little at both eends!"

Through all of this wandering plaint, Colonel Jo was keenly scanning that fat face, trying to read the thoughts that lay back of it. And he seemed on the point of saying something born of that scrutiny, when he was joined by Howard Mason, who slipped a hand confidentially through his arm, talking eagerly.

He had been strongly impressed by the appearance of young Townsend, partly because of his natural attractions, but more, no doubt, by reason of the inestimable service which he had so recently rendered Cora, when her life was imperiled.

"By that infernal loafer of yours, Townsend!" he sharply added, no doubt inspired to say as much by catching sight of Chincapin Dan who still lingered near, though he had not ventured to enter the building with the rest of the company.

"Whom do you mean, Mr. Mason?" coldly asked Townsend, turning so as to free his arm, and at the same time face his neighbor.

"Chincapin Dan, if you like that title better: that fellow over yonder! Puts me in mind of a coyote, with his slinking—"

"You are speaking of one whom I am proud to call my friend, sir," a little sharply interrupted Colonel Jo.

"That's all right, colonel," hastily uttered Mason, forcing a smile that was anything but hearty. "I don't want to quarrel with a close neighbor, but—I'd take it as a mighty favor if you'd put a limit on that friend of yours!"

"I'm not quite sure I fully comprehend your meaning, Mason?"

"You mean you'd rather not!" with a short, hard laugh, adding before the colonel could speak: "But I'll make my meaning so clear you can't help but understand. In one word—I don't like your young friend. I don't want him hanging around—around my little girl! Only for him, this day, she wouldn't have got into this scrape, and—"

"You forget that Dan saved Cora from Wild Hawk, when that devil ran off with her and Elma, Danny's sister?"

"His sister!" echoed Mason, with a sneering laugh. "Then who is the young man in yonder? Isn't he Elma's brother?"

"I don't know: wish I did!" frowned Townsend. "But as for Dan—"

"He's doing entirely too much loafing 'round this place. You may think him perfection, but I'll never stand by to see Chincapin Dan annoying my little girl, while I—"

"Father—for shame!" cried an indignant voice, and Cora herself stood confronting the ranchero, her face almost as red as her curly crop of hair, just then. "You talk of Danny like—and he saved me from worse than death, the time that awful man stole Elma and—"

"Cora!" frowningly interrupted her parent.

"I don't care! I like Danny, and I'm not ashamed to let the whole world know as much! Danny is a gentleman, and my best friend, and if you can't appreciate him, I know one who can! Danny—you Dan-i-el!"

She waved her hand imperiously toward the youth, who turned swiftly at the sound of her voice. He saw who were her present companions, and hesitated to obey that gesture.

"Dan-i-el Dick-er-man!" stamping one foot sharply as she repeated his name. "Will you make me crack my precious throat calling, sir?"

Just as he felt then, Chincapin Dan would rather have charged a dozen revolvers, but he had long since learned to comply when Cora assumed that imperious manner, and he quietly approached, silently touching his hat in recognition of her father, then softly saying:

"You called me, Miss Mason; can I sarve ye in anything?"

"By letting me pay my debts; yes!" nodded Cora, then half-laughing, half-sobbing as she caught his grimy paw between her little hands, to shake it warmly, the moisture adding to rather than dimming the luster of her blue eyes as she spoke: "Danny, I'm proud to call you my friend! I just—I like you, Danny! And—"

you lost your horse through me, to-day, and I mean to—"

"Never mention it, Miss Mason. It isn't wu'th—"

But Cora had dropped his hands, turning to impatiently motion to a cowboy who was approaching from the stables. He led a fine horse, fully equipped for the road, and Mason bit his lip sharply as he recognized one of his choicest animals, together with a first-class saddle and costly bridle.

Cora sprung forward, relieving the cowboy of his charge, then impetuously thrust the reins into the reluctant hand of her companion.

"Take it, Danny! You just must, sirl! It's only paying back my debts as far as they can be paid in such a manner. For if I had a thousand horses to give, that wouldn't even begin—"

"Take the horse, young man, since my daughter says she is in your debt that far," coldly interposed Mason, his usually florid face showing almost pale under his poorly hidden dislike.

Chincapin Dan involuntarily glanced toward Colonel Jo, who barely nodded assent, then his fingers closed loosely over the reins. Such a valuable present has seldom received such a reluctant acceptance, for, if he might have made the election, Chincapin Dan would have taken a sound thrashing in preference, just then.

"And now, that debt being cancelled, sir, just one word more," coldly said Mason, his tones almost rasping as he added: "The plain is wide enough for all of us, without your crowding others. So—the less we see of you about my place, the smoother matters will run along between us, and the better friends we'll be likely to remain!"

"Does that include me, Mr. Mason?" coldly demanded Colonel Jo. "If you seek cause for a quarrel, why not speak out, in so many words?"

"It don't include me, anyway!" cried Cora, forgetting all else in her hot anger, in her feeling for the youth she had learned to love so dearly. "I'm old enough to choose for myself, and—there, now!"

Before a hand could be lifted to prevent, she flung both arms about Chincapin Dan's neck, kissing him squarely on the lips, then turned and fled back to the house, blushing furiously, yet caring not a whit who had witnessed that impetuous debt-paying.

CHAPTER VI.

A DARK AND TROUBLED PAST.

COLONEL JO could act promptly when occasion required, and as the surest method of at least postponing the storm which threatened to burst, he slipped a hand through an arm of the angry ranchman, turning away with him, even as he spoke to the youth:

"Wait for me, out yonder, Dan. I'll soon join you, lad."

"Let him get off my range as quick as—"

"Steady, neighbor!" quickly interposed the colonel, turning Mason half around, so that they confronted each other. "I don't think you really wish to quarrel with an old friend?"

"Not with you, colonel, but—"

"Whoever picks a row with Danny, jumps on my back," with a light laugh that, somehow, seemed to strengthen rather than take the sting out of his words. "And can you and I afford to quarrel over what, after all, is just a girlish fancy, neighbor?"

"If I could feel sure it was only a fancy!" with a troubled frown coming into his florid face. "But—I know Cora heap sight better than you can, colonel!"

"I know that she is a dear, good, honest, frank little witch!"

"Mighty sight too good to throw herself away on any such trash as that fellow of yours, too!"

"If by that you mean Daniel Dickerman, Mason," began Townsend, only to be cut short with:

"Who else can I mean, man alive?"

"Then your meaning runs away with your judgment, neighbor. Danny is the peer of any man who ever trod the soil of this State, for he is true, faithful, honest—clean white from top to toe! I'm proud to call him my friend. I only wish I could rightfully call him my son."

"Instead of which he's simply a beggar, who—"

"You are too angry to be answered as your words fitly deserve, neighbor, so I'll simply say this much: Danny is no beggar, nor will he ever be one, so-called, while I or mine have a dollar to divide with him. What is ours, is his. When I die, Dan will share equally with my own sons. You ought to know whether that will leave him above having to beg his bread from door to door, Mason!"

"But if this new—"

Mason bit his lips sharply, flushing deeper as he caught the half-contemptuous smile that flitted across the colonel's face; but knowing that he had said too much not to say more, he hurriedly added:

"I know his claim is not yet fully proven, Townsend, but I really believe he is the lost heir, after all!"

"Co-heir, you mean, Mason. Brother left his property to his children, share and share alike, on the chance of their ever being recovered."

"Of course. But even that will cut down your share, and—"

"Still leave enough for Danny to keep a wife and family on, should he ever be fortunate enough to make such a happy winning."

"I'll never give my consent!"

"Before it is asked? Of course not, neighbor," laughed Colonel Jo, moving toward the rack where his horse stood hitched. "Time enough when trouble really comes, without trying to borrow a supply. And—don't be too hard on Cora, neighbor, or I'll be tempted to coax her into eloping with—your humble servant—no less!"

With an echo of his old genial laugh, Colonel Jo sprung nimbly into the saddle, tipping his hat to the sulky rancher, then riding rapidly away to rejoin Chincapin Dan, who was awaiting his coming at some little distance.

"Shell I turn the critter loose, Kunnel Jo?" asked the youth, his thin face showing how little he relished the situation into which he had been forced.

"Cora gave him to you, didn't she, Danny?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you want to quarrel seriously with her?"

"I'd sooner break the neck o' me—double times over!"

"Then don't fling away the gift she gave you, lad!"

"But—you see'd his face when she was doin' of it?"

Colonel Jo laughed at the recollection. He was not likely to soon forget. It had been the face of a man who was most unwillingly swallowing a particularly bitter pill, yet forced to hide his loathing as best he might.

"Do you care so much for Mason, then, Danny?"

"Not a durn—Waal, he's her pap!" reluctantly admitted the lad.

"And Cora is—Danny?"

"Waal, Kunnel Jo?"

"Keep on thinking she's just the dearest, best, most lovable little girl in Texas, if you see fit, but don't go so far as to imagine you are either of you old enough to—well, get married, and all that! Time enough for marrying, years from now, Danny, lad!"

"I ain't—I didn't—"

"Then I'm just more'n ashamed of you, sir!" with a prodigious frown and reproving shake of his iron-gray head. "If I had stood in your boots, and Cora had kissed me like that—well, I'd have knocked the old man stiff, and made tracks for the nearest preacher I could find to tie the knot!"

"Shell I go back an' play I was you, Kunnel Jo?" meekly asked Dan, but with a happy twinkle in his gray eyes.

There was no reply, and Colonel Jo rode on over the prairie, mechanically following the course which Chincapin Dan had set at the start.

His brief jollity had vanished. His head was bowed, his face very pale, very grave, his whole attitude that of a man who has suffered a severe blow, or to whom has unexpectedly come much food for troubled thought.

Chincapin Dan stole one solicitous glance into that troubled face, but he said nothing. If speech was needed, Colonel Jo would ask him for it. Until then, his place was in the background, his cue to wait.

That was not for many minutes. Colonel Jo gave a start, gazing around him like one suddenly roused from a dream.

"Which way, Dan?"

"I reckoned mebbe I'd better go fetch the riggin' I left on my critter, Kunnel Jo."

"That's so—I remember!" drawing a long breath as he tossed back his head. "You didn't leave the animal to suffer, of course?"

"No, I just stopped long 'nough to see it hed a leg broke past mendin', then give it a ball. I hed to ketch up Miss Cora, ef I could."

"I remember you didn't come inside the house, but you heard enough to understand that they claim the young man is a Townsend—Elma's real brother, Danny?"

Chincapin Dan nodded assent. Just then he had no words to spare. He was wondering how

much this unlooked-for appearance might mean to him. Not in a monetary sense; he was too young to give that even a passing thought, just then; but with Cora Mason and her father.

"Dan, would you recognize Wilder Hawkings again if you should meet him?" abruptly asked Colonel Jo. "If he had changed his looks, I mean, of course; would you know him if he had been greatly altered by nature, even?"

"I'd know him ef he was muxed up into the middle o' ten thousan', an' every one tryin' to kiver him up an' to fool the two eyes o' me!"

"You saw this fellow—Neutral Nick? Could he possibly be Wilder Hawkings, in disguise?"

"Him? Never a bit, sir!" was the positive response.

"You know we heard that Hawkings lost his right hand, when you left him for dead in the river, that time. Neutral Nick don't use his right hand; keeps it bandaged, as though hurt. May not that be the better to conceal the fact of its being a false member?"

"He couldn't fool with his eyes, Kunnel Jo. Them was big, an' keen, an' black as ever a buck toted into the skull o' him? This feller's is weenty, like a pig's. An' dull. An' light blue. Then he's twicet as narrer 'crost the shoulders, an' five times as thick 'crost the middle."

"I know; fat might have made that difference, though. But—you can swear by the eyes, Danny?"

"I kin. An' so kin Elmy, ef you ax her, Kunnel Jo."

Townsend rode on without further speech, and though Chincapin Dan burned to know more, he did not venture to press the point. If there was aught he should know, Colonel Jo would inform him when the proper time came around.

Each had ample food for thought, and each mind went ranging over the dark and troubled past.

That of Chincapin Dan flew back to the days when he lived after a shiftless, hand-to-mouth fashion, with an old man whom he called "pap," and a dark-haired girl whom he knew as "sis."

He recalled how this old man, Todd Dickerman, had suddenly "pulled up stakes" and started for Texas, by wagon; how they had been attacked one night while in camp beside Rocky Creek; how the old man had been killed outright and himself left for dead, with a bullet seemingly through his brain; while Elma had been carried off by the marauders, under Wilder Hawkings, an hereditary foe to the Townsends, as he afterward learned.

Dan was discovered by the two sons and a nephew of "Colonel Jo," who were hunting in "the Nation" with a guide called Uncle Billy Breeze, and these opportune friends joined him in rescuing Elma. He himself shot Wilder Hawkings, and saw him sink, with his horse, under the surface of the river, as he believed, forever.

Thus Elma was restored to her relatives, and she insisted that Danny should make his home with them, just as much her brother as he had been when both believed that tie of blood connected their lives.

A year passed peacefully, then another storm broke upon them. The son of Wilder Hawkings, Bruno, who had rescued his father from the river, with only the loss of his right hand above the shattered wrist, tried to kill Chincapin Dan, and then decoyed Elma and Cora from home, to hold them captives. He meant to force Elma into marrying him, then to put in a claim for the Twin Ranch; but Danny foiled the son, much as he had, at an earlier date, foiled the father. But there could be no mistake this time—Black Hawk Bruno was dead, for they watched his last breath, and buried him afterward.

But that last breath was spent in uttering a threat. He was dying, but Wild Hawk still lived! And the father would surely succeed where the son had ignominiously failed!

Up to that minute all had believed Wilder Hawkings dead. They tried to think so still, but the speech of that dying wretch had deeply impressed them, and they could not entirely banish the shadow.

Colonel Jo spent time and money freely in searching for Wilder Hawkings, giving over only when at a loss which way to turn. And now nearly another year had passed without sight or sound of their ancient enemy. Until this day!

The dead horse was reached, and the equipage packed behind Chincapin Dan's saddle. Then, as they turned their faces toward their home, the "Twin Ranch," as it was called, though there had been but one building or house proper on the place until, marrying Elma, Curly Clark Temple, Colonel Jo's nephew, set up a cozy little

home of his own in a shady grove half a mile away from the main ranch, Colonel Jo spoke again:

"I heartily wish you were Elma's real brother, Danny."

"Don't I, though?" quickly breathed the lad, his eyes glowing. "Then mebbe—"

"Mason might smile, instead of frowning, Danny?" with a short laugh of understanding. "That must be what you meant, for I know Elma, nor any of us, for that matter, needs no such actual tie to add to her love for you. But I meant—What did you think of the young fellow, anyway?"

"I'd rather wait a bit, Kunnel Jo," slowly said Chincapin Dan. "I hain't hed jest time fer makin' up my mind. But ef I must speak—"

"Don't. You're right. We both need time for thinking it all over. And then, too, we ought to have all heads together in council. The boys are quite as much interested as we, and Clark—more so! For if this young stranger is really the lost baby, that coming will lessen his wife's fortune by exactly half!"

"Thar'll still be plenty left, Kunnel Jo."

"Of money, or money's worth—yes! But I wasn't thinking of that, just then," curtly spoke Colonel Townsend, touching up his horse with the spur and breaking into a rapid lope.

CHAPTER VII.

UNCLE BILLY BREEZE.

JUST one week later Chincapin Dan was again in the saddle, riding slowly along, with only the companionship of Cora's gift horse to keep him "out of the dumps." But this was far beyond the powers of even that creature just then.

That week had been variously employed by the persons more deeply interested in the matter so curiously revived by Neutral Nick and his companion of the mesa. Every one appeared to think or talk about little else, yet, so far as Chincapin Dan could see, nothing of importance had been done or decided upon.

Colonel Jo had consulted with the members of his own family, which included Elma and Clark Temple, of course. Dan had been invited to attend, and lend his shrewd wits toward solving the puzzle; but after that first general consultation, where all were too deeply excited to do much more than utter exclamation points, he had kept out of the way.

"Best so, Kunnel Jo," he said, almost doggedly, in explanation. "I can't come to it with a clear, onprejudiced mind. In tryin' to make my judgment stan' up straight, I'd be more apt fer to tip it over backwards. An' so—I'd rather didn't, ef you please!"

That was where the shoe pinched!

"Young Jo," as the dashing claimant began to be known throughout the range, was still a willing and welcome guest at Mason's ranch, and seemingly just as agreeable in Cora's eyes as he certainly was in those of her father.

Although Dan kept sacredly outside of the limits of Mason's land, after the decidedly blunt hint the red-faced rancher had given him that day, several times he had caught distant glimpses of Cora and Young Jo riding in company over the prairie. And—many a despondent time the love-lorn lad had caught himself wondering whether or no Cora had ever given—or received—

He always cut himself short at that point, with a sense of shame. It was not Cora, he doubted, but her money-loving father!

"I say, you!" called out a shrill, cracked, peculiar voice, giving Chincapin Dan quite a start, though he instantly recognized its owner. "Ef I'd a' bin a Injun, Danny, how many times mought I a' skelped ye afore ye tuck a wake-up, an' knowed what was goin' on—eh?"

"Hellow, Uncle Billy! Glad to see ye!"

"Ya-as!" with a dry drawl and half-malicious puckering of his leather-like visage. "I hear ye say so, but I ain't seein' ye look it, Danny—not the weentiest bit, I ain't! Ef I was to say what, I'd liken my own self to a mighty bitter pill, which you reckoned hed to be tuck, whether or no!"

Uncle Billy Breeze gained his point—as he generally did, to grant him credit. His manner, more than his words, brought a smile to Dan's face and a laugh to his lips.

"Tis, ain't it?" he grinned, riding closer, then gripping the youth by a hand, and shaking it as though an age had passed since their last meeting. "Begun fer to reckon mebbe I mought a' bumped up 'g'inst a lump o' frozen fog, out fer its good health—I jest did! But—how come ye on, Danny, anyway?"

"Piert as ord'nary, Uncle Billy. What would ail me?"

"Waal, I ain't sayin', jest yit, Danny, but

mebbe I'll ketch up to it 'fore our trails part. Come to think—ye didn't look like ye was in a powerful rush to git anywhar, in petick'ler, when I sighted ye?"

"No; jest ridin', mostly beca'se I didn't hev anythin' better to do. Things don't seem to keep movin', o' late, ye see. Kunnel Jo don't seem to keer, much. An'—waal, you kin guess why, Uncle Billy."

All of Chincapin Dan's gloom had returned to him, and his thin face looked actually gaunt, to those kindly eyes. Uncle Billy shook his head, slowly, frowning a bit as he noted how much older his young friend looked, thanks to the past few days of suspense.

"Tell ye what, Danny!" he began, impulsively, but then as abruptly altered what he had started to say to: "Le's play we didn't hev nothin' better to do then to have a social easy, the two both o' us. Eh?"

The sun was warm, but a small patch of timber lay only a few rods distant; the same out of which Uncle Billy had ridden to intercept the musing cowboy; and now the veteran wheeled his horse and rode back toward this shelter, Chincapin Dan silently following after.

Alighting, and hitching their animals, the friends dropped down on the scanty grass in the shade, lying for some few minutes in silence.

Chincapin Dan was still feeling very "blue," indeed, and though usually so bluff, and free-spoken, and off-hand in his manners, Uncle Billy Breeze seemed at a loss just what to say, now the opportunity was given him.

Almost from their first meeting the veteran had taken a strong liking to the lad, possibly because they had so much in common. Despite the difference in age, Danny was quite the equal of Breeze in the arts on which the old hunter especially prided himself: wood and prairie craft. Indeed, on one important occasion, Dan had puzzled out a trail where Uncle Billy had been completely baffled, thereby rescuing Elma and Cora from the clutches of Black Hawk Bruno.

From that day, Chincapin Dan was sure of at least one friend whom neither trouble nor adversity could change.

Just now Uncle Billy Breeze was mechanically drawing his long white beard—white, save where a narrow band of tobacco-dyed hairs proclaimed the veteran a liberal user of the narcotic weed—through his bony fingers, at the same time keenly scanning the face and figure of his young friend, noting with actual grief the changes wrought by the events of the past few weeks.

"You never run to fat, nur extra flesh, Danny," he abruptly said, breaking the silent spell which had fallen over them both. "But ef ye keep on the way ye've bin goin', these few days, billy-be-dug-gun ef ye won't hev to putt on a blanket-coat 'fore ye kin ever begin to make a shadder in the sun—so you jest will, now!"

"I didn't—Hev I changed so much, then?" with a start which proved how far away his thoughts had been.

"The buzzards'll set up a howl that ye're tryin' to cheat 'em out o' your bones, Danny! Changed jest so much—no less!"

"I didn't know—I'm feelin' brisk 'nough, Uncle Billy. But—well, things is kind o' unsettled, like, ye know. An' that sorter—kind o' upsots a critter, ye see."

"Ya-as. I do know. What's bein' done, Danny?"

"Nothin'—looks like!" with sudden sharpness that told how tensely his nerves had been drawn, of late. "Wish't they was! Wish't the hull p'izen thing was settled fer good—or bad! I jest do!"

"An' I'm layin' thar's heap sight mo' show fer the bad then fer the good part," dryly uttered the veteran.

"Then you reckon—what?"

"That the good part hes a powerful hefty handicap to tote 'long o' that bloat who calls hisself Neutral Nick! I don't like him fer a cent, Danny! Nor fer a counterfeit cent, I don't!"

"Nor I," with a gloomy nod. "An' yit—he sticks to his story like wax, Uncle Billy."

"Why wouldn't he, when he laid it out that way? Why wouldn't he, when they's sech a power o' wealth 'pendin' onto it? Durn fool him ef he wasn't to! An' I do reckon he's bigger raskil then eediot, Danny!"

"Haven't you placed him yet, Uncle Billy? You said you thought—"

"No; I hain't placed him! I cain't place him! Yit, all the same, I'm layin' long odds he's clean p'izen—clean p'izen, Danny! An' so I told Kunnel Jo, more times'n a little, too!"

"Didn't pear to stir him deep, Uncle Billy,"

sighed Chincapin, that shade settling again over his freckled face.

"'Twasn't wasted, Danny: not clean wasted," grimly nodded the old man. "Kunnel Jo don't let on so mighty loud, but he keeps a-movin' an' a-thinkin' an'—Whar you reckon the boys is gone to, Danny?"

"Frank and Curly? Frank has gone—but I reckon Kunnel Jo told me fer a secret, come to think!"

"A secret big 'nough fer me, too," grinned the old man. "Kunnel Jo let me into it, him own self. An' right thar comes the why I reckoned Kunnel Jo moughten't be takin' things jest so ca'mly an' easily as he shows on the outside o' him, Danny!"

"You don't reckon?"

"I don't *hev* to, Danny, 'ca'se I *know*. Kunnel Jo's goin' to hev the trail made out mighty cl'ar afore he takes a step for'ard. Ef the critter they call Young Jo, is raally Young Jo, he'll git his dues; but he ain't comin' into 'em jest through sayin' he's got a hankerin' that way. Not with Kunnel Jo. Nur with Cory Mason, nuther, laddy-buck!"

Chincapin Dan started as though a wasp had stung him, but Uncle Billy laughed softly, laying a restraining hand on his arm, saying:

"Don't I know what's aildin' ye, Danny? 'Tain't nothin' fer to be 'shamed of, is it? An' ain't I your sure-'nough fri'nd an' pardner, lad?"

"Ef I could jest talk it all out, Uncle Billy!" impulsively panted the youth, his features working agitatedly.

"What's to hinder, Danny? I'm a ole critter, but my heart hain't *all* dried up. I love ye—I love the both o' ye, Danny—like ye was all-two-both o' ye my own kids. An' so—I say brace up! Quit mopin', an' git back the old grit o' ye. Stan' fer yer rights an' ef ye cain't git 'em any other way—*take 'em*, Danny! An' take the little lady 'long of the rest, too, by glory!"

Chincapin Dan was already brightening up under these earnest words, but he shrunk back a bit from the conclusion, a flush tinging his face.

"I didn't—it hain't gone so fur's that, Uncle Billy," he muttered, his gray eyes drooping. "We're both too young—Kunnel Jo said so, himself. An' then—thar's that Young Jo!"

"Which is one more why I told ye so, Danny," bluntly nodded the veteran. "I've hed the two eyes an' both ears o' me wide open, these few days. I know how things is workin'. Ole Mason favors the lad, 'ca'se he 'lows he'll come into half o' Twin Ranch, an' sech. 'Mighty good spec' he reckons it'd be; an' so he plays the best he knows to fetch it off. But—thar's anyway two heads in the fambly, an' I'm layin' my wu'th that the pritty red one 'll come out winner, ef you don't go clean back onto your best chainece, Danny, lad!"

"Ef I could only see it that way!"

"You couldn't help it, ef you hedn't lost your grip at the fust jump, Danny. Cory likes ye a mighty heap. She's let on as much, even to a ole coot like me!"

"I know she did—once—but look at the two of us!" desperately muttered Chincapin Dan, flinging out his arms and running a half-contemptuous glance over himself. "An' think how much *he's* comin' in fer! Then think o' *me*; jest ole Todd Dickerman's boy!"

"Ef you're good 'nough fer Elmy, an' the boys, an' Kunnel Jo—"

"Thar what cuts deepest, Uncle Billy," interrupted Dan, with forced composure. "I never mentioned it to anybody, 'afore, but thar's a big change goin' on in the hull of 'em—leavin' out Elmy: God bless her true, sisterly heart!"

"You don't mean?"

"How kin I help it, Uncle Billy?" with a bitter smile flitting over his thin face. "I don't say them-all *means* to show it, but I kin see the change a-workin', in spite. Even Kunnel Jo's growin' colder, an' acts like he was gittin' tired o' seein' me 'round under foot. An' so—waal, I reckon they won't be much cryin' done—leavin' out Elmy—when I've went away. I don't reckon on they will, Uncle Billy!"

"Went away!" echoed the veteran, springing to his feet in his earnestness. "Now you're talkin' plum' foolishness, Dan Dickerman! Keep your grip, an' I'm bettin' you'll putt the double-clinch onto the hull pesky kit-an'-boodle! Act out the man that's into ye, Dan!"

"I don't want to stay whar I ain't wanted, Uncle Billy."

"But ye *be* wanted, man! Ye cain't *help* but be wanted! Hain't ye double-aimed the right to stay an' be wanted? Waal, I do reckon! But, ef ye're dead-sot on goin', Danny, *take Cory 'long with ye!*"

Chincapin Dan also had risen to his feet, and

while Uncle Billy was talking, his eyes wandered out over the prairie, to be arrested by two distant shapes, both of which he instantly recognized.

"Does *that* look like she'd go with me, willin'ly, Uncle Billy?" he asked, with a forced laugh. "That's Cora—an' Young Jo with her!"

CHAPTER VIII.

YOUNG JO PUTTING ON FRILLS.

UNCLE BILLY shaded his eyes with a curved palm, though there was little need. He had no difficulty in recognizing the young couple, even at that distance. And Chincapin Dan had made no mistake; Cora Mason, escorted by "Young Jo," was indeed riding toward their station.

"Waal, what of it? Kin the girly-gal stop onder kiver all the lonesome time? An' ef Young Jo pushes in, kin she tell him to shet? An' him made so mighty welcome by her own pap?"

"It's her right, surely, Uncle Billy, an' I'm not kickin'," muttered Chincapin Dan, moving across to where his horse was tethered. "Reckon I'll be moggin' 'long, ef you don't mind, Uncle Billy."

"But ef I say I *do* mind, Dan Dickerman?" sharply frowned the old man, his sinewy hand dropping heavily on the lad's shoulder.

Chincapin Dan whirled quickly, with clinched fist; but one glance into that kindly face disarmed his anger, and his muscles relaxed.

"Why shouldn't I go, Uncle Billy? *They* hain't got no hankerin' to see the likes o' *me*—not much!"

"Did Cory-gal ever tell ye so, Danny? When did she hev a chainece to say even so much to ye? Now—come! honest, Danny!"

Chincapin Dan caught his breath sharply, but managed to mumble a few words, which Uncle Billy Breeze rightly interpreted.

"I reckoned as much," with a nod and a dry chuckle. "You hain't bin nigh 'nough fer speakin' sence Young Jo putt in his black face. An' sence you won't come to her, Cory-gal's got to come to you—see?"

Dan's face lighted up, but only for a moment. "They ain't room fer him an' me, too, Uncle Billy. I'm goin', now."

"Goin' to run 'way from jest the sight o' him? Dan Dickerman, ef anybody else was to tell me you'd turned coward—"

"Shet, Uncle Billy!" sharply growled the angry youth.

"What else 'll Young Jo reckon, ef he sees you skootin', tail-on-eend, jest at his showin' up? What else 'll Cory-gal think?"

"Ef I reckon he'd dast even think—"

"That's jest what he would, an' you know it, Danny."

"Ef it wasn't fer Kunnel Jo—I'd break his back!"

"Kunnel Jo wouldn't lose both eyes a-weepin', ef you was to, laddybuck," chuckled the old man, with a bright sparkle in his own eyes as he noted how much closer the young couple had drawn, during this talk. "But I ain't axin' ye ye to do jest so much as that, Danny. All I don't want is to see *you* runnin' from the likes o' *him*—Townsend or no Townsend! All I do want is to see ye give him back jest as good as he sends—an' a leetle better yet! Ef I was you—Danny!"

"Uncle Billy?"

"Ef I was you, and hed your same show, billy-be-dug-gun ef I jest wouldn't up an' cut Young Jo clean out! I jest *would*, now! I'd show the flinikin critter that Cory-gal was smart 'nough to pick out pure gold from brass, even ef the good be dingy an' the false rubbed up no eend! An'—brace up an' try it on, Danny!"

Chincapin Dan had gained the saddle by this time, and there was a brilliant gleam in his gray eyes which Uncle Billy interpreted after his own liking. And with a low but hearty chuckle, he took the Winchester rifle from its slings, leaving his horse still hitched.

He had perfect confidence that Chincapin Dan could more than hold his own against Young Jo, in case the rivals should come together, and though he was eager to see his young pard prove himself the better man, he was cool-headed enough to guard against any actual damage.

Chincapin Dan saw that to ride away now would surely seem like flight, and though he would far rather have avoided such an encounter, feeling as he did, he quietly faced the coming ordeal.

His heart gave a sudden leap as he saw Cora Mason, after a brief pause to gaze that way under the sharp of her gloved hand, wave her

whip, then urge her horse forward, sending a glad cry in advance:

"Danny—Mr. Dickerman!"

Chincapin Dan had touched his horse with the spur as he saw that he was recognized. He jerked at the reins as he caught that suddenly altered salutation. But he had gone too far to beat a retreat, now, and again rode on.

"Is it really you, Danny?" asked Cora, with a pretty affectation of doubt as they approached each other. "Have you forgotten how to shake hands with an old friend?"

"It ain't so mighty easy to ferget, Co—Miss Mason," huskily muttered Dan, with a little gulp as he changed the term. "Heap o' times I ketcht me wishin' it *was*!"

"Which means—must I call you Mr. Dickerman, Danny?" softly asked the girl, forcing a smile, though she had to bite her red lip to keep it from quivering as she noted the change those few days had worked in his face and manner of greeting.

"I say, you—what's-your-name!" sharply called Young Jo, coming up as rapidly as his lamed horse could be urged. "Swap nags with me until I can escort Miss Mason back home."

Both Cora and Dan started at that rude address, for they had temporarily forgotten the existence of such a personage as Young Jo, in this, their first meeting since they parted in front of the Mason ranch, with Cora's impulsive kiss burning on Dan's lips.

Dan stole a swift look into her face, his lips compressing tightly as he noted the sudden pallor which drove away her rich bloom. Naturally enough he put a wrong interpretation upon the alteration, and that error may have lent a harsher touch to his own voice as he looked toward Young Jo, saying:

"I ain't a-swappin', this evenin', thank ye, sir!"

"Oh, come off! Can't you see that my nag's crippled, and—bellow!" his black eyes opening wider, as though he had just recognized the seeming cowboy. "You, is it, Dan Somebody-or-other?"

"Mr. Dickerman, Mr. Townsend," crisply interjected Cora.

"Proud, of course, and all that," with a curt nod in recognition of the introduction. "Then, Mr. Dickerman, I'll have to beg you once more to loan me your nag for a few hours. My clumsy brute stepped into a burrow, back a bit, and wrenched his leg."

"Mebbe mine wouldn't come off any better in your hands, Mr. Townsend. An' so—I don't reckon I'll trust him thar. I'm settin' too high a value onto him—fer that!"

"Curse—ahem!" hastily recovering the angry slip with a feigned cough, then adding: "All right. I'll pay for the brute. Name your own figures and I'll give it. Come!"

"You hev'n't got money 'nough to pay fer jest one shoe off his foot, Mr. Townsend!" coldly retorted Chincapin Dan.

He spoke out more bluntly than he might, perhaps, had he not caught that swift glance from Cora's blue eyes, or noted her slight but unmistakable shake of the head in negation.

But Young Jo was not a whit less keen-eyed, and his wits were quite equal to the interpretation. His anger flamed up hotly, and all unused to being balked in anything he had once set his fancy on, he sharply exploded:

"Why you infernal—How do *you* know what amount of money I may or may not have?"

"I ain't tryin' to guess, sir. But ef you kerried the full wu'th o' the Twin Ranch an' all its stock in your pocket, you couldn't even begin to show 'nough money to pay fer this critter."

"Are you crazy—or drunk, Chincapin Dan?" in his hot rage betraying the fact that he knew only too well whom he was talking with.

"Nuther one nur the other, sir. I'll fetch you a fresh hoss, if you ax it, an' keer to wait so long, but—"

"I don't care to wait so long. I've waited too long as it is. I want that horse. Will you get down quietly, or shall I assist you?"

Young Jo sprung from his saddle and strode forward, his face almost ghastly pale, as it ever grew when his fierce passions ran riot. His black eyes had caught an ugly reddish glitter, which those who knew him best never cared to meet the second time.

"Mr. Townsend! you forget yourself!" sharply ejaculated Cora, a touch of the spur sending her horse between the young men.

"Beg your pardon, Miss Mason," with an almost painfully polite bow, as he caught the reins of her horse and forced it to back. "I haven't forgotten that I am dealing with an insolent beggar, whom your father—"

"Stop!"

"All right," with a short laugh, passing around the head of her horse and making a clutch at Chincapin Dan's leg, as though he would jerk him from the saddle. "Get off that horse, you beggar!"

But Dan easily eluded his grip, his own face very pale, but with not a shade of personal fear to be read therein. He simply jumped his horse out of reach, then quietly faced the now hotly enraged youth.

"Ef Miss Mason axes me I'll do it," he said, clearly. "But you're takin' jest the way to make me stick all the tighter, sir. As I said, I'll go fetch ye a fresh boss, ef you ax me to as a gentleman should ax another, but—"

"A gentleman—you?" sneered Young Jo.

"I introduced him to you as such, sir," interposed Cora, her blue eyes flashing vividly. "Do you deny my right or capability to judge?"

But Young Jo was far too angry to answer, or else too wise, knowing how surely he was losing all control of his tongue. And whipping out a revolver, he turned it toward Chincapin Dan, sharply crying:

"Will you 'light, or shall I help you—through this?"

"For shame, you coward!" panted Cora, leaning forward and swiftly cutting him across the hand with her rawhide.

"An' I say, *drap that gun, or I'll drap you!*" screamed Uncle Billy Breeze, who had drawn near, unperceived by the others, thanks to their busy emotions.

His rifle was bearing full upon the brain of Young Jo, but that sharp threat was hardly required to disarm him. The revolver fell from his sharply tingling fingers, and clapping them under his other arm, he forced an ugly smile and low bow as he turned upon the angry girl.

"Your servant, Miss Mason! I thank you for reminding me that the cowboy should be treated according to his station in life. The whip is best, and I'll test its virtues most thoroughly, as soon as I can catch the knave from under shelter of your—angel-wings!"

"Brag kin bark, but—" began Uncle Billy, only to be interrupted by Cora, now thoroughly angry and wholly reckless of consequences.

"Why, you—you miserable ruffian!" she panted, hotly. "You talk of whipping Danny? You couldn't begin to whip one side of him!"

"Whooray! an' amen to all o' that!" cheered Uncle Billy Breeze, tossing his battered felt hat high into the air, then dancing a jig over it as it struck the prairie. "Didn't I tell ye, Danny, lad? Didn't I jest *know* Cory-gal was pure grit an' true blue an'— Good Lawd! Ef I hed forty acre to spread myself all over!"

Through all of this Chincapin Dan had not uttered a word or made a move toward a weapon, even when Young Jo held him covered. But his recent gloom had vanished, and he looked brighter, happier, than he had at any time since Young Jo and Neutral Nick put in an appearance.

Young Jo saw something of this change, and rightly interpreted it. The sight or thought hardly added to his placidity, and knowing that he could hardly lose more ground in Cora's estimation than he had already forfeited, he smiled maliciously as he gazed boldly up into her face.

"You use rather emphatic terms for such a charming young lady, Miss Mason! But I'll give you credit for believing all you assert, provided— Dare you back your opinion with a kiss?"

"Sir!"

"Pardon my defective English, dear Cora," with another exaggerated bow. "I should have spoken thusly: Dare you wager me a sweet kiss that I can't wipe the ground with your noble champion, yonder?"

"Miss Mason, don't—" began Chincapin, twin spots of scarlet leaping into his cheeks, born of hot rage at that insolence.

"You see, my dear," laughed Young Jo, trying to twist his shadowy mustache, even as his red lips curled with scorn. "Your champion is begging off, already!"

"You lie, critter!" flashed Chincapin Dan, dismounting swiftly.

"Yes," cried Cora, proudly. "A dozen, since I know you can't even begin to win the ghost of a single one!"

"I'm open to bet a thousan', ef you want any more, Young Joe!"

CHAPTER IX.

YOUNG JO ON A TEAR.

THIS from Uncle Billy Breeze, who was grinning broadly, seemingly as greatly tickled as

any mischievous boy who had at length succeeded in setting two puppies to snapping and snarling at each other.

"Mebbe they won't be quite so sugary, nur so all-over-honey, like Cory-gal's, but I'm guaranteein' each one o' mine to kiver ten times as much space as ary one o' hern; an' *that* ought to count fer somethin'—don't ye reckon?"

"Three to one!" laughed Young Jo, with curling lips as he flashed a wicked glance over the little company, now plainly banded against him. "Just enough to make it interesting, though a rather motley array. A young beggar, an old bummer, and—my lady!"

"Danny, dear, will you see me safely home?" softly asked Cora, never glancing toward Young Jo, though her cheeks flushed hotly at his sneering tones.

"I reckon Danny dear has got a prior engagement, Miss Mason," the young man interposed. "And I've yet that dozen of kisses to win, so—"

"Thrash him, Danny!" cried Cora, once more losing control of her tongue. "You can—I *know* you can do it, Danny!"

"Ef I don't, he'll hev to kill me, Cora!" said Chincapin, in tones just loud enough for her ears to catch, as he swung himself from the saddle, to find the rifle barrel of Billy Breeze thrust between himself and Young Jo.

"Stiddy, all two both o' ye!" sharply cried the veteran, turning the muzzle so that it covered Young Jo. "You critters kin fight all ye like, but it's got be with jest the weepens natur' giv' ye. I ain't goin' to hev Kunnel Jo jumpin' onto my ole karkiss 'long o' lettin' ye hot-heads cut an' cyarve an' shoot an' blizzer daylight in an' out o' ye! So—shed yer guns an' stickers, both!"

Chincapin Dan promptly complied, unbuckling his belt and casting aside his weapons, though Young Jo showed no signs of disarming himself until fully assured that his rival had done so. Then he dropped his belt, casting after it a sheath-knife plucked from the back of his neck, giving a short, ugly laugh as he made further preparations for the struggle which, despite his pretended scorn, he knew would be a hard and desperate one.

Cora was frightened, now, but she did not know how to check what was mainly her own work, and before she could fully decide what to do, the youngsters were ready for the fray, and Uncle Billy was drawing back from between them, giving his final warning:

"It's lick or be licked, but I'll do the lickin' ef ary one o' ye tries to use gun or knife, or anythin' wuss then fists an'—"

"Out of the way, old bummer!" snarled Young Jo, no longer pretending to mask his hot rage. "I'll show you how easy—"

Chincapin Dan, encouraged as he had been by the favor of Cora Mason, seemed hardly less eager for the test, and with a movement swift and sure as that of a hungry panther, he sprang around Uncle Billy, and hardly granting Young Jo time for dealing a single blow, closed with his antagonist.

He could not have acted more wisely, since he was almost wholly ignorant of the art of boxing, while Young Jo showed by his manner of "putting up his hands" that he had taken lessons from a master.

It was this fact that lent Young Jo such confidence in his ability to handle Chincapin Dan, and only for that pantherish leap and swift grapple, taking him wholly by surprise, there can be little doubt as to what would have been the result. As it was, he had barely time to strike one blow, at half-arm range.

It knocked Dan's head back a bit, but those sinewy arms closed tightly about Young Jo's lithe body, then Dan's head came again, his face burying itself in Young Jo's neck as he strained every nerve and muscle to overthrow his rival.

The lads went down together, but Young Jo, taken so utterly off his guard, struck the ground first with a shock that fairly drove the breath out of his body.

In "rough and tumble" Chincapin Dan was entirely at home, and at once made sure of his advantage. He pinned Young Jo's arms to the earth beneath his bony knees, one hand gripping his throat like a vise, the other clinched and uplifted, ready to flatter the features below.

"Glory to smoke!" fairly howled Uncle Billy Breeze, almost beside himself with pure delight. "Licked a'ready! An' him pertendin' he was a fell-of-a-beller to fight! *Good Lawd!*"

"Own up you're licked, critter!" growled Chincapin Dan, holding back the threatened stroke. "I don't *want* to mash ye, but—"

"I'll kill you, devil!" panted Young Jo,

making a desperate effort to throw off that burden.

"Slam it to 'im, Chinky Dan!" laughed the old man, capering around like a belligerent goat. "Make 'im squeal, or bu'st a flue! Make 'im feel who's outside o' the cinch, an' who's in its middle! Didn't I tell ye so? Didn't I jest *know* you could put it onto him ef ye was to try?"

Another struggle, so desperate that, almost before he knew it, Dan let his clinched fist fall with a force that drew blood and promised to give birth to a beautiful pair of black eyes.

"Holler, an' I'll let ye up, Young Jo!" he grated, harshly. "I don't *want* to hurt ye. I'd nigh as soon fetch a lick at Kunnel Jo himself! But—I jest *couldn't* let ye take that boss—*my* boss!"

"I'll—I'll be your death for this!" hoarsely gasped Young Jo.

Instead of striking another blow, Chincapin Dan used both hands to choke his furious adversary into subjection, then muttered in calmer tones:

"I didn't *want* to do it, Young Jo, I say ag'in. But you jest *made* me! I offered even more'n was fa'r, but ye wouldn't listen to reason. You wanted my boss, an' 'lowed you'd take it. An' so—the critter I value double times over what I do my own life—the boss I jest *love*, mind ye!"

Speaking of the horse recalled the presence of its donor, and with a sudden flush of half-shame, half-pride, Dan turned his head—to see Cora give a nod and an appealing look!

"*She's* beggin' me to let ye up, Young Jo, an' her will is better'n law an' Gospel to me," quietly added Chincapin Dan, relaxing his grip and springing lightly to his feet.

He stood on guard, fully anticipating a furious attack the instant Young Jo could gain his feet. So did Uncle Billy, who let off a bowl of intense disgust as he saw his young pard relinquish the important advantage fortune had granted him.

"Be ye plum' crazy, Danny? Don't ye see the p'izen critter'll jest come a-whoopin', wild fer wool?"

But Young Jo, staggering to his feet, never even glanced toward the despised "beggar" who had so easily spread his pride in the dust. He never uttered a word to either of the trio, but with a curiously reeling stride, made his way to the lame horse, clambering into the saddle and riding away, slowly at first, but then—

All at once he seemed to rouse up, giving a shrill, savage scream as he dug both heels into the flanks of the animal, tearing a lariat from where it hung at the pommel, using it in place of the quirt he had left behind him, together with his weapons.

It was a curious phase in a contradictory character, for which no entirely satisfactory explanation can be given.

From the instant when he felt himself falling, at the mercy of the adversary whom he had held so cheaply, Young Jo seemed to be under a spell, no longer himself. He knew not what he said or did. He only remembered that Cora Mason had secured his release; through pity for his miserable weakness.

It was that humiliating thought that caused him to burst into such a wild frenzy, which he could expend only on his crippled horse.

To do him simple justice, Young Jo would have chosen death by the most acute tortures, in preference to defeat, particularly at the hands of one whom he had learned to both hate and despise.

"*And she begged him to spare me!*"

A storm of curses, wild, fierce, frenzied, burst from his lips, and as the lame horse stumbled, he renewed his cruel punishment, drawing blood with every rake of his heavy spurs, raising great welts with each blow dealt by the lariat.

He looked and acted like an insane man, just then. He showed no pity, urging the laboring beast onward with heel and hand and voice, cursing it, together with all else that this world contained. He did not seem to have any particular destination in view, yet showed no signs of surprise when the Twin Ranch came into view, far away, only adding to the punishment he was inflicting on the poor animal.

The end of that came shortly. Its injured leg gave way entirely, and horse and rider came to the ground in a heap.

Young Jo, dusty, ragged, braised, staggered to his feet and kept on toward the ranch, without even a glance toward his disabled horse. He no longer cursed. Once more he seemed like one in a strange dream.

As he drew near the house, Neutral Nick

called to him from the stables, a short distance away, no doubt alarmed by noting his strange disorder; but Young Jo paid no heed, keeping straight on, entering the ranch, and at once making his way to the room assigned him when he was first able to tear himself away from Mason's ranch and from Cora.

"Little devil!" he huskily panted, as he closed and locked the door behind him, sinking heavily into a chair. "Curse her! Curse everybody! Curse every thing!"

He sat thus until he heard a slow, heavy foot-fall nearing the door, when he sprang up with a hissing breath, catching up a revolver from where it lay on a stand near the bed.

"Young Jo! Boss! Honey, lad!" came a husky voice through the door.

Young Jo sprang to the barrier, rapping a panel with his weapon, viciously snarling:

"Skin out o' that, Old Nick! In out—or I'll riddle the door and your bag at the same time!"

"But— Good Lawd!"

Turning the key and jerking the door open, Young Jo thrust the revolver fairly against that purple face, his black eyes glittering like the orbs of an angry wild beast. And Neutral Nick, with a choking gasp of terror, turned and almost rolled down-stairs!

With a harsh, ugly laugh, Young Jo watched him until he had vanished, then reclosed his door, thrusting the pistol into his bosom, then tearing open a valise near the foot of the bed, taking therefrom a bottle of brandy.

"I swore I wouldn't, but—the dog's dead!" he laughed, knocking off the neck at a single deft stroke, then drinking greedily.

By that act, Young Jo cast all hope behind him, knowing as he did what a hideous inheritance had fallen to him. He acted with his eyes fairly opened. And yet—was he wholly responsible for his actions?

He was asking himself that question as he swallowed the fiery poison, but he made no effort to answer it. He was thinking of Cora Mason—he could find room for no other thoughts, just then.

From the very first he had fallen under the spell of those blue eyes and reds curls. He had never before met anything to compare with either. And day by day that spell had grown stronger and more complete until—

"She begged him to spare me! Him—that beggarly devil!"

With a savage snarl Young Jo hurled the now empty bottle through the window, laughing harshly at the sound of breaking glass. He tore open the door and descended the stairs with a dizzy bound, paying no heed to if he heard the sharp call that Colonel Jo sent after him from a room to the left. He rushed through the front door, almost bumping up against the fat figure of Neutral Nick.

"Ye durn imp! Ye've bin drinkin', an' now—"

"You're a devil, too, eh?" shrilly cried Young Jo, jerking out his revolver and striking Nick a terrible blow full on his crown, sending him to earth like a log. "I'm a devil! We're all devils! She's a devil too!"

Colonel Jo had gained the front door, just in time to witness that savage stroke, and he called out angrily, but in vain. Young Jo sprang to the rack where the horse which had just brought Colonel Jo back to the ranch was hitched, and breaking the halter by a single jerk, he leaped into the saddle, dashing away with a wild, maniacal peal of laughter.

CHAPTER X.

A TALK WITH COLONEL JO.

IN angry amazement Colonel Jo witnessed all this, but though he was still active and quick to move, before he could do more than shout a stern warning to the reckless youngster, all was over.

Neutral Nick was lying in a quivering heap in the dust. Young Jo was in the saddle of the fastest, best horse on the entire ranch, yelling and laughing and cursing, all in a breath, as he plied spurs and quirt, which he had snatched from the saddle-bow.

"The infernal— Has he gone crazy?"

So much burst from his lips, then, with humanity gaining the upper hand, Colonel Jo sprang to the side of Neutral Nick, bending down to ascertain if life yet lingered, after that terrible blow.

His loud, stern summons quickly brought portly Aunt Betsy, the colored cook, and—since Elma had settled down in a home of her own—housekeeper, together with her two assistants. One of these was sent to ring the alarm-bell in the open tower, not far away, to summon such

of the cowboys as might be within its sound, while the other, with Aunt Betsy, aided the colonel in lifting the unconscious man and bearing him into the house.

A hasty examination convinced Colonel Jo that Neutral Nick had received too serious an injury for his skill to cope with, and the first cowboy to reach the ranch was at once dispatched for the nearest doctor.

"Tell him it's a fractured skull, so he can come prepared," was his hurried instruction.

As other men came in response to that far-reaching signal, Colonel Jo bade them pick fresh and speedy horses, on which to follow and bring back the young lunatic who had acted so strangely.

"Treat him as you would one of my own sons, of course," he added, to each cowboy, in turn. "But find him! And when you have found him, bring him back here! You understand? Bring him back home!"

"We'll fetch him, Kunnel Jo," nodded one of the men, suppressing his natural curiosity as best he could. "But ef he's tuck your own critter—"

"Bring him back here, I say. That's all. You are wasting time."

The cowboy sprang away nimbly. When Colonel Jo wore that expression, and spoke in those tones, few cared to linger within range.

By a fortunate chance, the doctor was met by the messenger on the road, and neither spared horseflesh in returning to Twin Ranch.

Colonel Jo shook his head gravely in answer to that first inquiring look. He was experienced enough to feel sure that Neutral Nick had been seriously injured, though he did not care to express a positive opinion before one better equipped for deciding that point.

An examination proved that he had made no mistake. The skull had been fractured, though the doctor was not prepared to say just to what extent, off-hand. And believing that it would not be advisable to do too much, before the patient had at least partly rallied from the first shock, he enlisted Colonel Jo as an assistant for the time being.

By the time this was over, the day was spent and twilight was falling over the range. Chincapin Dan did not return to Twin Ranch until it was fairly dusk, though Colonel Jo met him and with word of what had happened, he would not permit Dan to say or do anything until he should have eaten his supper.

"Then you can come to me, in my room, Danny," he added, gravely. "I have something else to tell you, this evening."

That was a gloomy, unsatisfactory meal, though Chincapin Dan forced himself to swallow the usual quantity.

Even had nothing beyond the ordinary faced him on his return, he would have had quite enough to trouble him.

Even defeat at Young Jo's hands could have tasted little more bitter to him than had the victory he had so lately won.

True, the fight had been literally forced upon him. To have submitted to such arrogant treatment would have branded him a pitiful craven. Yet—he could almost have wished for that!

He was painfully sensitive, despite his rough training, and though Elma, and Colonel Jo, and all the rest, in fact, had tried their best to convince him that they regarded him as at least their equal, Chincapin Dan could never, even in the brightest days, forget the wrongs of which his father had been convicted.

Then, too, since the coming of Young Jo on the scene, he had been doubly sensitive, noting words and looks and actions which, under any other circumstances, would have passed as matters of course, and now magnifying them into evidence of growing dislike and distrust.

"An' now—how much o' all this come o' my downin' Young Jo?"

All of it, as he knew only too well! If he had yielded to the arrogant demands made upon him, there would have been no trouble.

"None fer him, anyway! As fer me—what 'count am I? Who keers fer me? Who keers a pinch fer what 'comes o' me? Nobody! Nobody but—an' she'll be quick to git over it when I'm gone!"

Even though half of his troubles were visionary, born of his own morbid musing, Chincapin Dan still had cause enough for gravity and uneasiness as he left the table, to slowly make his way to the apartment where he knew Colonel Jo was awaiting his coming.

"Shut the door behind you, Dan," said Townsend, rousing up from the easy-chair in which he had lost himself in dark and troubled thoughts. "You can lock it, by the way. What I've got to say is too important to run

any risk of intruders breaking in before the end."

Chincapin Dan obeyed, then stood before his patron, a hard, yet half-supplicating look in his gray eyes as he huskily spoke:

"Kunnel Jo?"

"Well, Danny?"

There was a note of surprise in his voice, as Townsend turned the lamp-wick a bit higher, the better to view that pale, freckled face.

"I made you think a lie, Kunnel Jo, when I fu'st come home, an' you axed me hed I seen ary thing o' Young Jo. I said I hedn't; fer I knowed you meant jest a hour or so ago. But I *did* see him, 'bout three by the watch."

"You did? But that was before he came back home, so it can't make much difference."

"I'd feel heap-sight lighter in the heart o' me, Kunnel Jo, ef I could feel dead sure o' that! Fer—waal, I hed to lick him to-day!"

"What do you mean? Surely you two haven't been fighting?"

"I reckon you'd call it fightin', Kunnel Jo," muttered Chincapin Dan, rapidly narrating just what took place on the prairie by the motte. "I jest hit him once, an' he didn't bit me any. But—waal, mebbe that was 'nough to set him off so crazy-like!"

Colonel Jo bowed his face in his hands, seemingly lost in thought. Chincapin Dan stood in silence, until he could no longer bear the suspense. Then, in low, unsteady tones he muttered:

"I give ye my word, Kunnel Townsend, that I stu'd it jest as long as flesh 'd hold out ag'inst the devil! I kep' sayin' your name, an' Elmy's name, an' all that—over 'nd over. I fit myself heap harder'n I ever fit him! But—he swore he'd hev my hoss—the critter Cora give me, ye know! An' he'd jest crippled his own nag. An' I knowed he hated me, ef he didn't hold a bitter grudge ag'inst me. An'—waal, nobody'll ever be able to begin to guess how much I love that hoss, Kunnel Joel! An' so—I jest—I hed to fight fer it!"

"And you reckon I'm angry with you for standing up for your own, Dan Dickerman?" asked Colonel Jo, lifting his head and gazing intently into that pale face.

"I ain't blamin' ye any fer doin' of it, Kunnel Townsend," quietly added the lad, his downcast eyes failing to note that growing smile. "He's your rightful kin, I reckon. An' blood's thicker'n water, folks say. An'—waal, make the best of it, you couldn't keep a-seein' of me 'round the place an' help 'memberin' that I'd licked your kin. An' so—I reckon I've out-lasted my time here. I ought to never 've come back, after that row, but—"

"But—what, Daniel Dickerman?" asked Colonel Jo, as the lad abruptly broke off, warned by his quivering, husky notes.

"I couldn't sneak off that way!" with sudden fire in voice and face, his eyes now fully meeting that grave gaze. "I couldn't go an' never let you know how mighty grateful I was fer all you've done fer the likes o' me, Kunnel Jo! I jest hed to come an'—an' anyway try to show ye the shadder of it—I jest had to!"

"If you hadn't, I'd have hunted you up, Danny, lad, though you found a way to the center of the earth!" laughed Colonel Joe, catching those still grimy paws and pressing them warmly.

"But—ye don't 'pear to take me, Kunnel Townsend!" muttered Chincapin Dan, unsteadily. "I say I licked your kin, an'—"

"I'd have felt like licking you if you hadn't!" was the impulsive interjection. "It was your horse, and I can guess how Young Jo asked you for its loan."

"He didn't ax. He jest ordered, like I was lower'n the dirt under his two feet!" with a brief flash of honest indignation. "But ef that was all, Kunnel Jo, I wouldn't hev kicked so hard. He mought 'a' rid me, my own self, with stiff-cairb an' fresh-filed spurs: might 'a' rid me the bull range over, an' never a cinch drawn, bein' he is what he was to you an' Elmy; but—that hoss was dearer'n life in my eyes! I jest couldn't see him hev'n it, Kunnel Joe!"

"You did perfectly right, and would have been justified in punishing the young rascal ten times worse than you did."

"But—I reckoned you'd—"

"Then you wronged a true friend, Danny," smiled Colonel Jo, with a passing glance toward the open window in one side of the room. "If Young Jo is really the rightful heir to Twin Ranch, I'm just as much of an interloper here as you dare think yourself!"

"But he wouldn't even dast to think o' pushin' you out!"

"I'm not so mighty sure of that," with a short grim laugh. "But I asked you here to speak on

that very subject, Dan. Among other things I wanted to make you understand that my home is your home, as long as you care to share it with me. And among the rest, I wanted to say:

"Young Jo is accepted by us, only on probation, Dan. None of us have ever fully admitted his claims, or even acknowledged his relationship. Of course we could not refuse him shelter, and such. Of course we have acted a part, so far as to let him take for granted we believed him all he claimed to be; but instead of fully believing him the long-lost son of my twin brother, I more than half-believe him a cunning impostor!"

Chincapin Dan stood with gaping mouth, literally too much amazed to fairly comprehend the full meaning those words should have conveyed to his brain.

"But— Good Lawd!" he gasped, drawing a long breath as Colonel Jo abruptly ceased speaking. "Then you reckon—"

Little wrinkles came between the dark brows of the colonel, for he began to think he had permitted his tongue too free swing. Not that he for a moment distrusted Dan, or doubted his prudence. He could as soon doubt his own honesty. But such words, provided they were founded on fact, as he really believed, were dangerous material to spread about.

He glanced out through the open window, as that reflection crossed his busy brain. Such a thing as eavesdropping hardly occurred to him, even then, for with the single exception of Neutral Nick—now lying in a deathlike stupor—Young Jo was the only person on the premises whom he could even suspect of listening.

He knew that Young Jo must be far away from Twin Ranch, since as yet nothing had been heard from the cowboys sent in quest of him, but for all that he stepped to the window and looked out into the night.

All was still and peaceful without, so far as he could see in the gloom, and half-laughing at his own silly doubts, Colonel Jo turned his back to the window, his face toward Chincapin Dan, rapidly selecting the words he wished still to utter.

In a measure rallying from his amazement, Chincapin Dan was about to speak to the colonel, when he caught sight of a vaguely outlined face at the open window. But before he could cry out, or make a move, that face was replaced by an armed hand! And as a knife flashed into the light for an instant, Colonel Jo fell forward on his face, gasping!

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE WILD HAWK'S TALONS.

COLONEL JO was in an almost direct line between the open window and his young friend, so that Chincapin Dan caught but an imperfect glimpse of either face or arm, though the light of the lamp was reflected back from the polished blade as it came swiftly through the opening.

He saw it whirl, for the weapon was sent as a missile, and he even heard it strike. Then the colonel flung up his arms, with a choking, horrible sound gurgling up into his throat as he took one step forward—to fall heavily on his face!

And as he fell Chincapin Dan, more like one in a hideous dream than aught else, saw the metal-tipped haft alone, for the gleaming blade was buried out of sight!

For that one second the lad stood as though petrified. Only an instant, in fact, though to his wildly-excited brain it seemed an age.

A hoarse, choking cry rose in his throat as Colonel Jo struck the floor, and jerking a pistol from his belt Chincapin Dan crossed the room at a single bound, then doubled up in a ball to shoot through the open window, thinking of nothing but vengeance.

Better for him, perhaps, if he had taken more thought to himself, for almost before his active form touched solid earth a crushing blow fell upon his head, dropping him in a quivering heap.

"Grip and muffle!" came a harsh, sinister whisper through the shadows cast by the building itself.

Two very substantial shadows fell upon the luckless cowboy, taking every possible precaution against his raising the alarm.

A third shadow hung over them, now looking at their work, now rising more erect to flash a fiery glance to either hand, anticipating the coming of enemies, two or four-footed, then giving a brief look at the open window, the very type of vicious watchfulness.

"Pick up and skip, ye devils!" came his hissing whisper once more.

There was no time for asking or examining whether the luckless youngster was living or dead. At any instant the alarm might break forth, and if caught in the act, red handed, short and sudden would be their shrift!

The two shadows lifted Chincapin Dan—dead or living—from the ground, his head muffled in a bag or heavy wrap, his arms and legs bound, hastily but effectually. With his limp, nerveless form swaying between them, they crept swiftly through the night, keeping as much as possible in the shadow cast by the house, flitting from thence to the cover of the nearest outbuildings.

The third shadow drew closer to the window through which his arm had hurled that deadly missile. And his lips curled back from his teeth in a wolfish grin as he caught sight of Colonel Jo lying still and motionless on the carpeted floor.

Still nearer he drew, the lamplight gradually making his bearded face visible, until he could see the metal-tipped knife-handle shining in the reflected rays. And he laughed softly, viciously to himself as he looked.

"A bit lower than I intended, but he straightened up just he I made the cast," he muttered, through his beard, seemingly fascinated by that ugly sight. "A true line-shot, though! Through the spine—out at his throat—cut his life short, and his death-yell as well!"

The metal-tipped haft rose up in view, just a bit below the collar worn by Colonel Jo. Only the handle: the blade was—ugh!

The gloved hand of the assassin was resting on the window-sill, and he seemed about springing through the opening, possibly for the purpose of adding robbery to his foul crime. But he started and shivered as he heard a sound—surely someone was approaching that room!

Abruptly recalled to a full sense of his danger the assassin dropped away from the window, gliding swiftly, silently along the side of the building, then crouching low and running rapidly along the course taken by his satellites only a few moments earlier.

As he ran both ears and eyes were frequently directed backward, anticipating the alarm; but none came as the moments sped by.

Although he may not have known it, the knife-thrower could hardly have picked out a more favorable opportunity for committing his atrocious crime. With the single exception of the doctor, there was not a well man about the house, and he was seated beside the bed on which Neutral Nick lay unconscious, watching and noting even the breath which the injured man drew.

Even the cowboy who had brought the doctor, was in the saddle, helping on the hunt for Young Jo.

Will Townsend, Colonel Jo's youngest son, was over at Elma Temple's home, temporarily acting as "man of the house," since Colonel Jo had sent "Curly" Clark Temple on a secret mission to San Antonio. Frank, the eldest brother, was away also, gone to Galveston. Young Jo was—none could say where! And Chincapin Dan—

"Dead or alive?" the assassin was even then asking himself, as he rapidly retreated from the ranch buildings. "I put my muscle into the blow, but I'd rather—I want to see him *alive*—first!"

His strong teeth clicked together like those of an angered wolf, and he lifted his gloved right hand above his head, bringing it down with savage energy, much as he might had it held a knife, and there been a defenseless bosom exposed to its keen point.

He glanced over his shoulder toward Twin Ranch. The building was blended with the darkness, for as yet the moon had not risen. There was a dim, barely visible twinkle of lamplight coming through door or window, but that was all.

No alarm. No wild outcry of grief or vengeance. And the assassin laughed aloud as he knew that his dastardly crime was yet undiscovered.

"Only you and I, Chincapin Dan!" he snarled, rather than laughed. "It's our secret, as yet. And when—Ha!" with a quick breath, as he noted a deeper shade not far in advance. "Skin out, ye devils! If ye only knew what a glorious prize ye're bearin' off!"

He sent a low, but clear whistle in advance, by way of warning, then increased his speed until he overtook his two tools, finding them panting briskly under their burden and their hasty flight.

"Keep your lick, fellows!" he grimly growled, without offering to share their burden. "One more burst, and we'll shift him on the back of a good horse—so!"

He pushed past them, leading the way, aiming for a little patch of timber not far distant,

where he had placed his four-footed servants in ambush while creeping up to the ranch.

He had the animals ready for the road by the time the two ruffians reached the motte, but his first move was to bend over the limp figure which his tools only too willingly dropped to the ground.

Almost breathlessly he made the examination, a low, vicious snarl of intense delight crossing his lips as he noted unmistakable signs of lingering life.

"I felt him shiver an' try to kick, oncet or twicet, boss, es we toted the critter," panted one of the ruffians.

"He's a tough knot, or I'd have cracked him wide open," laughed the chief villain, straightening up once more, with a long breath of relief. "Luck goes with us, lads! The old cuss downed, the young one living, but helpless! I'll fill your paws to running over, for this night's work!"

"Ef our karkidges ain't filled full o' lead!" somewhat nervously mumbled one of the knaves, casting an apprehensive look in the direction of Twin Ranch. "An' that's what, ef we're ketcht sight of, boss!"

This alarm was communicated to his mate, who ventured:

"I kin stiddy him in the saddle, ontill he's better able fer to straddle a critter, boss, ef *you* reckon—ef you think we'd orter be makin' tracks in a hurry!"

"Don't let your fears run away with your nerve, lads," chuckled their master, in too great glee to take offense at even such blunt hints. "Nobody's discovered Colonel Jo as yet, and he mighty sure *he'll* never spread the alarm of his own accord! No—*he'll* never tell how lightning struck him down, after all these long years of waiting! He'll never tell—never tell—never tell!"

He almost chanted the words, filling in between with a low, snarling laugh as he moved quickly, almost dancing, before that prostrate figure.

The two stout knaves shrunk away, frightened by his extraordinary actions, and this served to recall their master to his senses. With a curse taking place of that vicious laugh, he sprung into his own saddle and sharply gave the ruffians their instructions.

Acting promptly on these, the little party was soon under way, riding briskly through the night, one of them supporting Chincapin Dan across the saddle before him, the other leading an extra horse, which evidently had been provided for the safe-carriage of a prisoner.

For half an hour or more they rode rapidly forward, when the man in temporary charge of Chincapin Dan caused a halt by declaring that the prisoner had recovered his senses.

The announcement was true, but before the luckless youth could make use of his wits or physical powers, a secure gag was inserted between his jaws, to take the place of the muffler. His bonds were rearranged after he had been placed astride the saddle, and then the hurried journey was renewed.

Only to come to a halt again when the rough ground and scattered timber lying adjacent to the river, was reached; and even then it seemed as though the halt was but for temporary purposes.

Chincapin Dan was taken from the saddle and lowered to the ground, his arms still bound firmly, but his legs left unhampered for the time being, one of the stout knaves keeping a wary grip on his arm while watching his mate kindle a fire between a couple of sheltering rocks.

When the fire was fairly ablaze, the chief came forward, one hand to his face, which fairly bristled with a fiery red beard; false, for as he confronted Chincapin Dan, he jerked the hairy mass clear, laying bare a smoothly shaven countenance which might have been pronounced fairly handsome under different circumstances, but which now resembled the face of a veritable demon!

"Slip out the gag, you!" growled the chief, with a nod to the guard, "Now—Todd Dickerman's whelp! Do you recognize me?"

Dan never said a word as he gazed unflinchingly into that fierce, pitiless, vengeful face, though the fire that leaped into his gray eyes plainly betokened full and complete recognition, despite the change wrought by the time and suffering and the razor: for never until now had he seen this man without his thick, glossy black beard.

"Sulky, you young devil?" snarled Wilder Hawkings—for he it was, beyond a doubt. "Lost your tongue, have you?" and he caught Chincapin Dan by the lower jaw, as though he

would wrench it open to satisfy his jeering doubts.

That thin-lipped mouth opened, but only to send a shot of spittle squarely into that dark, swarthy face!

Wild Hawk reeled back as from a stunning blow. The guard crouched low down with a gasping sound, shifting his grip to Dan's ankles. For he expected no less than a shower of lead to avenge that silent insult!

For a breath or two such menaced, but then, forcing a hoarse laugh Wild Hawk put up his weapon, wiping his face, coming nearer, to say:

"Common killing is too little for that, Daniel Dickerman, so we'll pass it by for the present. It's one way of answering a civil question, though it betrays your breeding! But—aren't you a weenty bit ungrateful, Danny, lad?" his tones softening until they involuntarily reminded his auditors of a purring panther.

"Just when I'm risking my own neck, trying to save you from the noose of the lynchers? When I'm laying myself open to the ugly suspicion of being an accomplice in your wicked, unnatural crime of—shall I tell you *all* I know, Dan Dickerman? Shall I say that I was listening under the open window at Twin Ranch, while you and Colonel Jo were quarreling? That I saw you knife him in the back?"

"You lie, devil!" hoarsely panted Chincapin Dan.

"Yet they'll find you missing—and find your own knife buried to the hilt in Colonel Jo's back, Danny Dickerman!"

CHAPTER XII.

A DEMON IN HUMAN GUISE.

THE new day found Wilder Hawkings, his men, his captive, snugly hidden away in a lonely spot among the hills, which promised to afford him a snug refuge as long as he saw fit to harbor in the vicinity of Twin Ranch.

He had been in no haste to strike his long-meditated blow against Colonel Townsend, the man whom he hated so long and so intensely. He had carefully planned each move in advance, up to the instant when, seeing the long-delayed vengeance fairly within reach of his arm, he had hurled the stolen knife straight at the spine of his enemy, then making the best of what followed.

"I don't see how I could have bettered it," he was musing, this bright morning, lying under shelter of a curving-topped bush, staring out across the visible stretch of plain beyond and below. "I meant something of the sort ever since I caught sight of that knife. Yet—if I could only have gripped Colonel Jo, as I've pinched his kid!"

It was the face of a demon in human guise, just then, so full was it of devilish hatred and pantherish thirst for torture.

But the spasm died out almost as quickly as it had found birth. A cruel smile curled his thick lips as he muttered:

"All right! I could never have taken *him* living. He's dead—but the kid still lives! And, after all, I hate him ten thousand times the worst!"

He sprung to his feet and passed between a couple of huge rocks, the tops of which almost touched, far above his head. He came out upon a secluded little glade, fairly roofed over by tree-tops, the trunks of which found root close to the rocks, thus inclosing a quiet retreat which only a close search might discover, or even suspect.

Chincapin Dan was leaning back against one of those trunks, stout thongs of rawhide binding him fast. Other bonds were upon his feet, and though his lips were left free, a stout gag hung handily about his neck, in readiness for instant use.

"You can take a bit of a walk, Moses," Wild Hawk crisply uttered, addressing the outlaw on guard just then. "Go help Jack keep watch on the open, though I'm not uneasy about being followed. Without a head, the Twin Ranch cowboys are hardly to be dreaded. And their head is in—call it heaven, for *your* sake, Chink, dear lad!" ending with a mocking laugh as he dropped to the cool earth in front of his captive.

Moses beat a retreat, his curiosity to see and hear what was to follow not being great enough to make him risk being caught eavesdropping. Wild Hawk kept all who served him under a stern curb.

"Hardly polite in me, waiting so long before calling to inquire concerning your health and wishes, Mr. Dickerman," purred the villain in his smoothest tones, as he gazed through half-closed lids at his victim. "But—well, you acted

rather incredulous last night, and I thought maybe you'd require so much time in which to reason out the perfect truth of what I told you. See?"

There was no reply. Chincapin Dan gazed steadily into Wild Hawk's swarthy face, as though solely interested in noting each change wrought by time and shaving. But, as he had told Colonel Jo, no cunning art or elaborate disguise could ever alter those black, demon's eyes!

"For it was the gospel facts I gave you, Daniel Dickerman," Wild Hawk pursued, his voice growing harder. "It was *your* knife that killed Colonel Jo. Never mind how it came into my hands; that don't figure in the story, just at present. Your knife, with your name engraved on the metal tip, mind you, boy! The very knife that Colonel Jo gave you, only last Christmas!"

A faint spasm contracted those freckled features, and Wild Hawk laughed maliciously as his watchful gaze detected it. This was part of his long-pondered revenge, and it tasted very sweet!

"And when Colonel Jo's corpse is discovered—when it *was* discovered, I mean! Of course it has been found, long ere this. But—what I meant to say, your knife would be instantly recognized, as the body was examined. Not a soul on Twin Ranch but could bear witness to its ownership. Then—who used it?"

"Only you and I can swear to that, Daniel Dickerman! I'll never, and you *can't*. Naturally Young Jo will take charge, and maybe you can guess what that means? Or—I'd rather tell you!"

"You had a fight with Young Jo yesterday. You said you got the best of him: I heard as much under the open window. I believe you were lying, but that don't count. Enough that you had a racket with the new heir. And, of course, Colonel Jo heard of it. What then? Simple as mud!"

"He sided with the master, of course. You being only a worthless, shiftless hanger-on about the place. And, naturally, Colonel Jo gave you a neat dressing down with his sharp tongue; maybe ordered you to skip, without ceremony. Then—you stabbed him from behind, and was so badly frightened by the act, that you took to your heels and fled."

"I can read it all off, just as smoothly, just as surely, as though I had taken part in the council! And that's why I told you, last night I'd just risked my own life to pull your neck out of the lyncher's noose!"

With a low, yet vicious chuckle, Wild Hawk paused to note the result of his swift sentences. Chincapin Dan might have worn a mask of painted iron, for all the alteration to be detected in his face. He had nerved himself to endure without flinching. He could cheat Wild Hawk out of so much of his triumph, at all events.

The pitiless villain, too, had regained full control of his passions, for though he must have felt some chagrin at the apparent waste of breath, he showed no signs in his swarthy face. Only in his black eyes that evil light grew more intense.

"Are you wondering why I run that risk, Daniel Dickerman? Why I didn't simply toss you back into the room, then raise the alarm, and either run away, or else stop long enough to swear I saw you stab your benefactor, then fall before his dying hand?"

"I might have done that, without the slightest risk of discovery. No one unless it might be Elma Temple could possibly recognize me, and without a beard, I doubt if she would have remembered my face. And when I had said enough to tighten the rope about your neck, I could have faded out of sight and hearing: could, but didn't!"

"Shall I tell you why, Daniel Dickerman?" leaning forward, his hot breath fanning that marble-like visage, even then showing no emotion, though the lad must have known that his life hung by a hair. "Have you forgotten that day at the crater? Have you forgotten that day by the river when you gave me *this*, ye imp of perdition?"

As he spoke, Wild Hawk shook his gloved right hand before the gray eyes of his captive, then struck him heavily in the face.

The blow came as from wood or iron, rather than from living flesh, and though he showed no signs of fear or anger, Chincapin Dan recalled the words spoken by Colonel Jo when he expressed his suspicion concerning the bandaged right hand of Neutral Nick; *this* was the false hand, not that fat paw.

Wild Hawk once more fought back his savage

rage, and stiffly working his jointed fingers before his blazing eyes, he spoke again:

"As good an imitation as money could purchase, Daniel Dickerman, but far different from the hand your cursed shot crippled! And—do you know—I had to suffer a double amputation? My son—Bruno Hawkings, the gallant lad who died through *your* cursed interference, while trying to make good the oath of vengeance I, his father, had taken and recorded! He, Bruno, saved me from the river which you thought my grave! He cut off my hand, above the wrist, because nothing less heroic could have saved my life. And—I had so much to live for!"

"It wasn't *his* fault, what followed. He did the job neatly—I might say, heroically! But I caught fever in the wound, long before I could get to a refuge. And—for months I hung over the grave!"

"That, too, I owe to you, Daniel Dickerman! That, and all that followed after! I owe you the death of my only son—the only being on earth whom I loved, or who loved me—my gallant son, Bruno!"

His voice grew husky, then choked. He turned his face aside, for a few moments, then swiftly faced his captive, fiercely looking for some sign of exultation. Only to utter a forced laugh as he found himself foiled once more by that hard-set, immovable visage.

"You're a tough little devil, Chincapin Dan," he laughed, harshly, "and I'd almost admire your nerve if I didn't hate you so entirely! Shall I tell you how much that is? Shall I tell you—Bah!" with a repetition of his former mocking, merciless laugh. "Actions talk heap sight louder than words, and the hour for action is creeping up—is crawling along mighty fast, my lad!"

"You begin to look mighty tired of listening, Chincapin, but I've got nothing better to do, so I reckon you'll have to put up with what's offered. And then, time 'll come when you can't even listen, Danny!"

"I'm sorry on that account, for I'd *just* love to have you hear what Will, and Frank, and Curly, and Elma will have to say when everything goes to prove *you* the murderer of their loved Colonel Jo! And—I almost forgot the charming little fire-top—your own precious Cora, Danny! Wouldn't you just love to hear *her* opinion?"

Even that shot failed to reach its mark, so far as those malicious eyes could see; yet the poor, helpless lad's heart was being wrung dry, drop by drop! Ah! what would Cora think, when the damning evidence was brought against him? What would she think when everything went to brand him as a foul assassin, who had struck his benefactor from behind his back, then fled through the night, to vanish forever?

If Wild Hawk had only known it, he was not wasting his breath, just then. Though he might put his prisoner to death with the most atrocious tortures red Indians ever invented, he could not inflict anything like the torments those jeering words had given.

"I didn't mean to tell you as much, Daniel Dickerman," the arch-villain added, after a brief pause, "but you are already condemned by those who, only yesterday, but loved and respected you! Jack brought in the news: I sent him back, last night, to spy a bit. He says the cowboys are fairly wild to lynch the devil who butchered their beloved Colonel Jo! Do you remember whom they must suspect of that crime?" with a low taunting laugh. "You, my brave knight of the knife!"

"They are hunting for your trail, swearing never to let up until they have caught and dragged you like a felon at the tail of a mustang back to Twin Ranch. They swear to hang you in sight of your victim. And—more, Daniel Dickerman! Jack brought back word that Elma Temple—your loving sister, as she and you believed for so many years! That Elma was lying at the point of death, going from one swoon into another, each one threatening to end in death!"

"Why? All *your* work, Chincapin! All *your* work!"

There was the malice of a very demon in his words, his chuckle, his contorted features, his blazing eyes. He had waited for his revenge a long time, but now he was tasting it.

"Cora Mason was with her, Jack says, though he couldn't learn anything positively about little fire-top. But, witnessing the pitiful sufferings of her dear friend as she must, it isn't so very hard to guess how she must regard you in her heart, Danny, poor wretch! And, to think!" with a low, devilish burst of glee as he rubbed his hands together, gloating over his helpless victim. "All the time they are cursing

an innocent party, never once giving a thought to the real sinner!

"Innocent, did I say?" suddenly calming down, showing his teeth in a snarl instead of by laughing. "Of Colonel Jo's death, maybe, but one guilty of ten thousand fold worse than that! He deserved to die, but my gallant son Bruno! And you killed him! You caused his death, with far worse tortures than I know how to inflict upon you. Yet—I know how to make you suffer in mind, if not in body!

"Shall I tell you how? Or shall I leave you in suspense until the night comes? For you die this very night, Chincapin Dan! Die the death of a dog!

"Have you forgotten the quicksands, in which Bruno sent the horses on which he carried off Elma and Cora, that night? Where he fooled old Billy Breeze into thinking the whole party had smothered?

"No! You try to hide it, but I see it in your eyes that you have not forgotten No Bottom Sands! Well, those sands shall be your grave, this very night, Daniel Dickerman! And I'll watch you, while you watch death slowly crawling up your body, to enter at your gasping lips, you hound!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW YOUNG JO CAME HOME.

ALTHOUGH Wilder Hawkings lied to Chincapin Dan when he declared that his man, Jack, had played spy about Twin Ranch to bring back word of Colonel Jo's death, and the consequent denouncement of the missing youth, whose marked knife had cut short that loved life, he had every other reason for believing all he asserted.

His aim had been true; too true, in fact, for had the keen point of his deadly blade swerved an inch to the right, or to the left of the spine at which he hurled it, Colonel Jo might indeed have died, just as Wild Hawk declared he did die.

As it was, the weapon struck the ivory haft of Colonel Jo's knife, worn after the Southern fashion, at the back of his neck, under his garments. This turned the point sufficiently to foil death, though not enough to escape an ugly wound. The blade passed its length through skin and flesh, the heavy shock causing Colonel Jo to stagger and fall, the knife-haft showing back of his neck, its blade apparently driven directly through the middle of the spine.

In falling, his temple struck heavily against one corner of a chair, and this, added to the paralyzing shock received by his spine, caused that deathlike silence on his part when Wild Hawk stole back to peer through the window at his diabolical handiwork.

But Colonel Jo was far from being dead, though he lay without sense or motion for many minutes—though he gave back no answer to the timid rap at the closed door by the dingy knuckles of old Aunt Betsy.

It was her approach that deterred Wild Hawk from entering the room, as he intended, and to that fact the colonel undoubtedly owed his life. Once within the room, the assassin could hardly have avoided a discovery of the truth, when he surely would have made his blow good.

Aunt Betsy repeated her summons at the closed door, but as no response was given, she returned to the chamber where Neutral Nick was lying, now showing signs of reviving from that cruel blow, and reported to the doctor. He had sent her to request Colonel Jo to come to him.

Waiting a few minutes, closely watching his patient, whose restlessness gradually increased, the physician again sent for Colonel Jo. And then, when the same report came back, he left Aunt Betsy on guard duty, going to the closed door in person.

The natural result followed. Alarm was felt, and the locked door was forced open.

Yet no wild outcry was made. Colonel Jo had recovered from that double shock—the blow to his spine, as one knife drove the other sharply against it, and the wound itself—sufficiently to nod and mutter a warning word; and Dr. Perkins was a quick-witted man.

He called Aunt Betsy, and with her aid carried Colonel Jo to his own chamber, where a close inspection assured him that the wound, though so narrowly missing vital points, was really nothing serious, with proper attention. And knowing that he was perfectly capable of doing the work alone, he sent Aunt Betsy back to watch over Neutral Nick.

Colonel Jo attempted to speak several times, while his wound was being attended to, but Dr.

Perkins as often forbade; but when the dressing was completed, the rancher asked for Chincapin Dan.

Dr. Perkins turned abruptly away, to keep the lamplight from betraying the ugly suspicion which he knew was printed upon his face. As he did this, his eyes fell upon the metal-tipped knife, now lying on the little table near the head of the bed.

That knife bore the name of Daniel Dickerman, and in his hot indignation at what he believed was foul ingratitude, he forgot his professional caution, and showing Colonel Jo the blood-stained weapon, denounced Chincapin Dan as the would-be assassin.

And Colonel Jo! Despite his wound, despite the shock that still so curiously thickened his tongue and dulled his brain, Colonel Jo laughed the charge to scorn!

He managed to tell how he had been stricken down by a blow from the rear, while Chincapin Dan stood in front of him, in plain sight. And he bade Dr. Perkins at once send Negro Pomp to Elma's house, with word for Will Townsend to come home at once.

To sturdy Will Colonel Jo confided, bidding him find Chincapin Dan, if finding was possible. Neither father nor son for an instant doubted but that the brave lad had attempted to avenge that cowardly blow, though they began to fear the worst, since Dan had not returned.

Will and the negro servants, aided by lights, searched for some token by means of which that disappearance might be solved; but in vain. The hard, beaten surface near the ranch retained no trail, and though the dogs were brought from the corrals, and urged to their best, even stubborn Will had to confess himself beaten.

After trying to decide for himself what was best to be attempted next, Will returned to the chamber where his father was lying, buried in a profound sleep. For a few sickening moments Will feared that this was death, but then, noting the gentle, regular breathing, he stole away on tiptoe, to seek Dr. Perkins.

"It's the very medicine he needs most, Will," the doctor said, as they stood at the threshold, watching the wounded man. "The cut is comparatively nothing—in two weeks he'll never know such an event ever took place—but his spine has received a severe shock, and if his brain is kept continually working—no, sir!" with sudden decision. "I'll not permit his sleep to be broken until it comes naturally to an end, no matter what else happens. Do the best you know how, and trust to Providence for the rest!"

Thus Will was cast upon his own resources. But only for a time.

He resumed his search for Chincapin Dan, until once more disgusted, then he ran to Clark Temple's house, rousing Elma and telling her all that he knew of what had happened.

"Go find Uncle Billy Breeze—go at once!" Elma decided, preparing herself to go to the other house.

Will obeyed, feeling very much like kicking himself for not having thought of the old hunter before. If any mortal man could find Chincapin Dan, by picking up and puzzling out his trail, Uncle Billy Breeze was his name.

Be sure Will lost little time in mounting and riding to the lonely cabin where the veteran lived, and Uncle Billy was fully as active in getting into harness. They were back at Twin Ranch considerably before day broke, and greatly to the joy of both, Colonel Jo had roused from that deathlike slumber, his tongue free and his wits bright.

He could give Uncle Billy but little information, after all, and that leather-like visage wore a grave, troubled look as the hunter left the house to begin his search for the missing man.

His first move was toward the stables, where he knew Chincapin Dan kept his favorite horse: the one given him by Cora Mason.

The animal was in its stall, thus destroying one possible hope: Chincapin Dan could not be trailed by following those hoof-prints!

There were no lack of trails leading to and from the Twin Ranch, but which one would carry him to Chincapin Dan? Uncle Billy Breeze asked himself this question, but looked in vain for an answer.

No particular signs had been left by that brief struggle and capture under the open window. Uncle Billy had looked in that quarter the first thing. He found faint signs of human feet, but who had made them? And when?

Several of the cowboys, whose duties had

kept them away from the house through the last day and night, were given barely time to take a drink and sup, then were sent off to look for the missing youth.

And so the weary, anxiety-laden hours crept along, until the sun had crossed its meridian, and the afternoon was wearing away.

For the hundredth time, or more, Elma Temple went to the front door to gaze wistfully over the plain, fighting for hope against growing despair. If Curly would only return! How quickly he would clear matters up!

No one was in sight. Will had returned a little before noon, only to saddle a fresh horse and ride away again, eating a bite as he rode.

Nothing had been seen or heard of Uncle Billy Breeze, since the sun had fairly risen; but his prolonged absence only contradicted the old saying that no news is good news. If good news came his way, how quickly he would return!

With a weary, heart-sick sigh, Elma turned away from the door, to return to the chamber where, once more soundly sleeping, Colonel Jo was spending those cruel hours so much more agreeably!

Meantime, Will Townsend had made a discovery which brought the heart up into his throat with—as he afterward declared—a force that fairly loosened his teeth!

He was riding rapidly over the plain, just why, or just where, it might have puzzled him to clearly explain, had any one asked the questions, when he caught sight of a little cavalcade just coming into view from beyond a clump of trees, a mile or more ahead of him.

Will jerked up his horse, shading his eyes from the sun as he intently gazed at the horsemen. What were they bearing between them: the leading four, that was?

"A blanket—with some—thing on it!"

As by instinct, Will knew that "thing" was a body, but the very word choked him. For he was thinking of poor Danny, and—

He fiercely dug spurs and plied quirt, sending his snorting horse ahead at full speed, like a true Townsend facing the very worst, instead of shrinking away.

"'Tain't quite so bad as it might be, young boss," cried one of the cowboys acting as relief to those bearing the blanket between them. "He's pretty bad bunged up, but he's livin', yit!"

"Where did you find him? How did he—poor Danny?"

"Whar his critter drapped dead under him, boss," was the quick reply, with the somewhat puzzled addition: "But 'tain't Danny: leastwise I never heard him called anythin' but Young Jo."

By this time, Will was near enough to make the discovery with his eyes, instead of his ears alone, and he started at that pitifully crippled shape lying in the blanket stretched out between the four cowboys, each of whom held a corner as they slowly rode along.

Up to this minute he had been wholly in the dark concerning Young Jo and what had happened the day before. He had been at Elma's, and since his summons to the side of Colonel Jo, no one had even so much as mentioned the name of Young Jo in his hearing.

Divining something of this from his face, the cowboy quickly told all he knew: of how Young Jo had raced away on Townsend's best horse, and how they had trailed him, to find him lying with broken legs and arm, beside the dead horse.

"He jest kept the pore critter jumpin', sir, as long's it hed a bit o' wind. It died a-racin', so it did!"

They had seen nothing of Chincapin Dan, and satisfied that his further search in that direction would be time wasted, Will turned back with the cowboys, soberly watching Young Jo, his bronzed face turning a bit paler with each faint, pitiful moan that came through those livid lips.

Living? Yes, as yet! But for how much longer? Would there be a breath of life remaining in his sadly crippled form when Twin Ranch was reached?

Will was asking himself this question, when he caught the first glimpse of another moving object, far away over the plain, yet evidently heading for the same destination as themselves.

He could make out a covered wagon, of the well-known "democrat" pattern, traveling rapidly and easily on its springs. He also made out a horseman bearing the spring-wagon company. Then—

Not daring to cheer, so nigh that crippled lad,

Will swung his hat in glad greeting, dashing at top speed to join his brother Frank! For he was the horseman. And—Curly Temple was driving the wagon!

Back of Curly, shaded by the oil-cloth cover, was a single passenger, whose pale, worn, yet

still handsome face was anxiously turned upon the now near ranch. Then—

She sprung out of the wagon, without waiting for Curly to pull up. She rushed to where the cowboys were gently lowering the blanket with its crippled burden to the ground. One look, then—

"My boy! My poor, poor baby Gordie!"

CHAPTER XIV.

NEUTRAL NICK TELLS THE TRUTH.

MOTHER and son, one looking almost as death-like as the other, were tenderly carried inside the house, and given such care as Dr. Perkins, with his amateur assistants, could supply.

Mrs. Grable was speedily revived, but Young Jo required far more attention.

When his horse fell dead beneath him, at the end of that maniacal ride, he had fared but little better. An arm and a leg broken; his head terribly cut and bruised; his entire person suffering more or less.

His skull was sound, however, and, provided there was no serious internal injury, the physician declared, he would eventually recover.

Colonel Jo had risen from bed as soon as Elma told him of the return of Young Jo, and in her natural agitation let drop something concerning "his mother!" And with all his powers seemingly restored, Townsend waited and watched, noting each broken, loving murmur dropped by those lips.

His mother! Gordon Grable! Then his first vague suspicions had been well founded, after all!

And feeling assured on this point, Colonel Jo was not much longer in drawing Frank Townsend and Curly Temple into his own room, where he eagerly listened to their reports.

Frank had little to say, though he had been sent to Galveston, which was the place where Neutral Nick declared "Young Jo" had lived, from the time "his ole 'oman" left him in charge of a distant relative, until he "ketched 'ligion," and sought the lad out to restore him to such of his kindred as might have survived all those years.

But, Clark Temple had a far more interesting story to tell. His only clew was a little notebook, found among "Young Jo's" belongings, which bore the name of Gordon Grable. Only that, backed by a photograph of Young Jo, taken unawares by Cora Mason with her handy little camera, at Colonel Jo's expressed desire.

Yet they proved quite sufficient, for on showing the photograph to the head of police, in San Antonio, it was instantly recognized as a likeness of Gordon Grable, well known in police circles—not as an actual criminal, but as the wildest, most reckless "youth about town" to be found in that section.

"And when I found his mother, she told me all," added Temple. "She said her baby had run away, without telling her whither he was bound. She clearly took no part in this attempted imposition. Neutral Nick must clear up that part of the story, or—pull hemp, the knave!"

Then Colonel Jo more fully explained all that had transpired at and about Twin Ranch, during the past four-and-twenty hours. He feared that Neutral Nick would die without confessing the whole truth, though Dr. Perkins insisted that he would soon waken, in his full senses.

Strongly as all were interested in this now exploded plot, their anxiety for Chincapin Dan's safety overshadowed all else. And though both the young men were greatly jaded by their almost sleepless work during the past week, neither could think of rest or quiet while their friend and adopted brother remained unfound.

Hardly stopping to take a bite, they mounted and rode away to join in the search, though it was but little better than blind wandering. There was not a single clew to follow!

Colonel Jo could hardly refrain from joining them in their quest, but managed to do so, thanks to the glad tidings which Elma brought from the chamber where Neutral Nick lay under the doctor's care.

"He has roused up and Doctor Perkins said you must come—at once, Colonel Jo!" panted Elma, pale with excitement and long suspense.

Be sure Colonel Jo was not long in reaching that chamber!

Dr. Perkins met him at the door, finger on lip, a warning sparkle in his eyes. Then the physician softly murmured:

"Not a word in recognition! Not a word, but follow the cue I give you!"

Backing into the chamber, he placed a chair for Colonel Jo, turned so that his face would be hidden from the man lying on the bed. And with his own eyes veiled as he covertly watched

the effect of his words, Dr. Perkins began speaking:

"The young gentleman, I'm happy to inform you, colonel, is in a fair way to recover, especially since he has recognized his mother—Mrs. Grable!"

There came a sudden rustle of the bed-clothes, and the quick catching of a breath. But, neither gentleman looked that way, or showed any interest, though Neutral Nick was staring wild-eyed toward them.

"There appears to be some little mystery about the affair, but I questioned Mrs. Grable closely, and she declared that the young man was her own son, Gordon Grable. And he recognized her, I'm happy to add!"

"Good Lawd!"

"Hallo!" ejaculated the doctor, stepping forward, a bland smile playing about his lips as he beamed cheerily upon his patient. "Woke up, have you? And how may we be feeling, just at present?"

"Whar's—what was you—" huskily gasped Neutral Nick.

"What were we talking about, you mean?" smiled the physician. "Oh, I was just telling Colonel Townsend that Young Jo is really the son of Mrs. Henrietta Grable, of San Antonio. She is here with her son, and he has admitted that he is not, never was, nor ever will be Joseph Edward Townsend! Only that, my dear fellow!"

Dr. Perkins stepped aside, with a wave of his hand, silently bidding Colonel Jo take charge of the case, now that he had paved the way to a complete understanding.

"Who set you up to playing this dirty trick, Neutral Nick?" bluntly demanded Colonel Jo, plainly resolved to extract the whole truth, no matter what the consequence might be to this pitiful knave. "Young Jo has confessed that he is an impostor. Now it's your turn. Speak!"

"Ef I do—ef I tell the plum' truth—what'll ye do to me?"

"Confess everything, and I'll treat you white—I'll give you food and shelter. I'll have you nursed back to life and health, then let you go your way without punishment. Refuse to speak—try to tell me even the ghost of a lie—I'll bundle you out of doors, to die like a mangy cur!"

"Don't—I'll tell you!" gasped the shivering wretch.

He told his story by snatches, broken by his weakness, after a rambling fashion, which would consume far too much space for a literal rendering.

He had lied in declaring Wilder Hawkings had died at Wichita, of small-pox. Instead, that arch-villain was still alive and scheming for revenge. And, having Neutral Nick in his power, through past crimes, he had picked him out as a fit tool to aid him in his audacious schemes.

It was true that Neutral Nick had helped Hawkings steal away the children from Twin Ranch. It was true that the youngest, the boy, had been left in his care until Hawkings should see fit to reclaim the lad, and it was true that, by brutal treatment while drunk, Neutral Nick had caused his wife to flee from her wretched home, taking the stolen boy with her.

But Nick had lied in declaring that his wife ever returned to him after that flight. Instead, she had died within the same year.

He swore that he had told the truth when he spoke of the kidnapped boy being marked, by Wilder Hawkings and himself, with a tattoo-mark on one shoulder, to guarantee future recognition; but he had lied when saying Young Jo was that infant, now a young man grown.

Neither he nor Wilder Hawkings had known where to look for the lad, when Wild Hawk hunted Neutral Nick up once more to play a nefarious part; but the arch-villain declared that a false heir would be still better for his purpose, and in the end they settled on Gordon Grable as the one most suitable.

At this point Colonel Jo interrupted Nick to ask a question—where was Wilder Hawkings?

"I don't know, boss," was the meek response. "I hain't see'd him sence we parted at Santone."

"Have you forgotten what I told you about lying?" sternly demanded Townsend. "You are holding something in reserve—what is it?"

But the invalid tremblingly protested that he had told the whole truth; and, so protesting, his eyes betrayed their master.

Colonel Jo saw as much, and with difficulty choked back his hot rage, for he knew now who had cast that knife at his back! He knew now who had spirited away Chincapin Dan, when that gallant lad did his level best to avenge the fall of his benefactor!

Wilder Hawkings!

And believing that Neutral Nick knew that the demon was or had been lurking in the vicinity of Twin Ranch—believing that he lied in asserting his ignorance of that fact, Colonel Jo wondered in how many other points the injured wretch had been false?

During those moments of silence, his mind flew back over all that Neutral Nick had said, to fasten on one particular point which he resolved to press. Not just then, but after he had lulled the fat liar to at least a partial sense of security.

The more surely to do this, Colonel Jo pretended to be convinced by that last assertion. And then, as though he felt assured Nick would be as entirely surprised as he himself had been, Colonel Jo narrated what had happened him, the night just past.

He was shaken a bit in his belief, as he saw how plainly Nick was surprised, for there was no shadow of a lie in those widely-opened eyes, no affectation of terror in that quivering voice:

"Him—here? An' me a-tellin'—don't let him git at me, boss! Don't let him know what I've told! He swore he'd bloody butcher me ef I even dast to dream of it in the sleep of me! He swore—"

Colonel Jo leaned forward, to drop a cool palm over those quivering lips. His voice was grave, his eyes very keen and bright as he slowly said:

"Trust for trust, Nick! You swore to tell me the whole truth, yet you lied in part, if not in whole. Now—make a clean breast of it all, or I'll permit Wilder Hawkings to live long enough to wreck his uttermost spite on your guilty head!"

"He made me—he biled a knife to my wizen an' made me take a turrible oath never to—never to let on as—"

His voice choked, his face turned purple. Dr. Perkins came forward with anxious face, but Colonel Jo sternly waved him aside.

"What was it Wilder Hawkings bound you by oath never to mention, even in your dreams?" sternly demanded the colonel.

"You'll perfect me ag'in' him—ef I say it, boss?" whined the miserable knave, fawningly.

"He shall never harm a hair of your head. I swear it!"

"Then—ef I must! Then—I lied when I said I didn't know whar my ole 'oman left the kid!"

"Edward's boy! The real heir! Where, you—where, I say?"

"She run off. She went to her brother's house. She died thar. But the boy lived, an' was brung up by her brother as his own kid!"

"Who was that brother? What was his name? Where did he live?"

"His name was—was—Todd Dickerman!"

"My God!" gasped Colonel Jo, almost suffocating. "Then Danny—"

"Dickerman never hed a boy o' his own—yes, Danny's the kid!"

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE GRIP OF NO BOTTOM SANDS.

THROUGHOUT that long day, Wilder Hawkings gave his evil tongue full swing, trying his level best to break down the nerve of the lad whom he hated so intensely.

He had counted so surely on wringing at least a look of horror, if no more gratifying token of fear, from Chincapin Dan by the mention of the far-famed quicksands; but even in that he had been foiled, thanks to the grim resolution displayed by the young cowboy.

More than once, that day, while waiting for the coming of twilight to cover his movements, Wild Hawk brought up the subject, telling how he meant to tie Chincapin Dan fast in the saddle, blinding and muzzling the horse bearing it, to guard against trouble through sight or scent, then to prick the animal into leaping from the low bank into the shallow water covering No Bottom Sands.

Moses and Jack set everything in readiness for an early start, and though they had only a few miles to travel before reaching No Bottom Sands, Wild Hawk was in motion with his captive just as the sun dipped its red face behind the western horizon.

Chincapin Dan made no resistance, because he was given no chance to make trouble. His feet were released only long enough to allow the burly outlaws to lift him into the saddle, and they held him tightly while Wild Hawk renewed the bonds.

Few words were spoken during the ride to No Bottom Sands. Chincapin was unable to talk, thanks to the gag between his jaws. Moses and Jack never ventured to speak in the presence of their master, without invitation or serious cause.

And Wild Hawk was bottling up his venom for a better opportunity.

All eyes were on the keen alert, searching every direction in turn, but nothing was seen to create an alarm, and as they came where they could catch a glimpse of the river, shining like silver under the rays of the now risen moon, Wild Hawk laughed in savage glee.

"Your winding-sheet, Daniel Dickerman! Fall to work lively, men! I'm fairly famished for the long delayed feast?"

It was clear that both Moses and Jack had received their instructions in advance, for, without further hint, they completed the grim preparations.

The horse was carefully blinded, and its nostrils plugged up, snug enough to defy its uneasy snorting for a minute or so. After that, it could make no difference!

Hawkings hovered around them, watching their movements, his own full of poorly suppressed excitement. He laughed, he purred, he shook his maimed right hand, he almost danced in his unholy glee.

If ever a veritable demon took on human guise, it was then and there!

"Enough, men!" he cried, hoarsely, at length, pushing them aside to assume full command once more. "You can look on—though I almost begrudge you that big a share in my vengeance! You can watch—but I must do all the rest, with my own hands!"

He led the uneasy mustang closer to the river's edge, where the bank was hardly a foot above the placidly flowing water. He softly purred to the beast, patting it as with a hand of velvet until its fears subsided. Then—passing back and standing clear, he suddenly slashed the poor creature across the hips with his knife, at the same time giving a heavy shove that, to prevent a fall, forced the mustang to leap wildly, blindly into the water!

A violent splashing—a furious swaying to and fro as the doomed animal felt that horrible grip tightening about its legs—one loud snort that freed its nostrils—then a yielding to palsy terror on its part!

Chincapin Dan swayed in the saddle, purposely adding to that heavy shock, partly in hopes of thus bursting his bonds, partly thinking to throw the mustang on its side, when the water might be deep enough to float them beyond the awful grip of the quicksands. But the instant he realized that neither hope could be gained, his stubborn defiance returned, and he sat without voluntary motion in the saddle.

No exhibition of fear or shrinking on his part should add to the triumph of that demon!

Tough sinners though they were, both Moses and Jack shrunk a little apart from their chief, awed by his diabolical exultings. Possibly they felt something akin to pity for the doomed youth. If so, their sympathy was not nearly strong enough to lead them to defy that terrible master, who now, seated on a boulder as if the more fitly to enjoy the hideous scene, for a few moments did not speak, only looked his fiendish pleasure over his consummated vengeance upon the doomed boy. Then, as the mustang began to struggle anew as the water crept nearer its life, he once more tried to shake that almost incredible nerve. His revenge would lose half its sweetness unless he could make Chincapin Dan show that he felt the bitter!

"Spawn of the devil!" he cried, forcing himself to speak plainly, that there might be no mistaking his full meaning. "Do you know just why I've hated you so thoroughly? Because you foiled my long cherished plans of fingering the Townsend riches? Because you crippled my good right hand, leaving me to suffer ten thousand deaths—in mind, even as in body? Because you killed my noble son, Bruno—the bravest, the handsomest, the truest son mortal man ever loved!"

His voice choked for a little, but he fought back the emotion: the one single trait that proved him human!

"Yes, whelp of the fiend! For all of these reasons I have hated you, and sworn bitter vengeance on your head enough to doom to death a million such cubs as you! Yet—I have hated you for still another reason, Daniel Dickerman!

"That is a lie! You are not Daniel Dickerman! Not a drop of Dickerman blood flows in your veins! You are—if you would know, bow that stubborn neck, you devil's cub!"

But, if Chincapin Dan moved, it was only through the dying struggles of the poor mustang, who had sunken so far into the death-grip of No Bottom Sands, that it could no longer hold its nostrils above water.

That death-struggle did not last long. The tortured animal choked, and then died. But

its furious if fruitless struggles made too much noise for Wilder Hawkings to repeat his question, just then, and when the end had come, he was convinced that by repeating it, he would only place another defeat on record against himself.

"I meant to keep the secret of your birth fast-locked within my own breast, you imp of perdition!" he said, instead. "You have lived a beggar, and I thought to see you die a beggar. Yet—it would be glorious sport to send a final message by your spirit to the shade of the man I hated even worse than I hate you! So—you are not Daniel Dickerman! You are not Todd Dickerman's cub! You are—what Gordon Grable, alias Young Jo, is supposed to be—the lawful son and heir of Major Edward Townsend and his lady wife!"

Even that shaft seemed to fail its mark. Grim and silent Chincapin Dan waited for the awful death to crawl higher and nigher!

CHAPTER XVI.

"DIDN'T I TELL YE SO?"

He had abandoned all hope, nerving himself to meet death without an outward trace of fear or flinching.

He knew what No Bottom Sands were. He knew that, when Elma and Cora had been stolen away by Black Hawk Bruno, the horses which had been taken away with them, in company with others ridden by their captors, had been driven into the sands at that precise point, to be totally swallowed up.

He knew that no living thing had ever been known to escape that horrible grip, when once it had fairly fastened upon a victim.

And despairing of earthly aid, Chincapin mentally left a parting sigh for each of his friends.

Wilder Hawkings eagerly watched the effect of his last thrust, bursting into a torrent of curses as he found it had failed him, just as all other taunts had failed. And he might have cut his own revenge short in his savage rage, only—

A spout of flame shot out of the shadows, and Wild Hawk, his blasphemy cut short, staggered half way around, to fall heavily, hardly a single second before Moses fell—and Jack as well!

The three shots came so swiftly following each other that they blended in one prolonged blall! And the last was still echoing when a wild, half-laughing, half-sobbing cry came to blend with it!

"Whooray! I'm comin', Danny, lad! I'm comin'—red-hot fer—"

Uncle Billy Breeze said that much, then one foot spurned the quivering body of Hawkings, and the gallant veteran clinched a bared blade between his teeth as he deftly dropped on his stomach in the water, shooting along like a chip until he caught Chincapin by the shoulder.

"Stiffen ye—so!" he mumbled, then took the knife and sinking the upper portion of his person beneath the water, he thrust his armed hand into the soft sands, down close to Dan's leg, feeling for the things that connected his feet beneath the mustang's body—felt for and found them!

With a desperate effort he drew the buried hand free, coming to the surface to puff and pant an instant.

"Stiddy, lad, while I cut these 'funnelly cords! Then I'll rope, an' make a hoss haul ye out o' that—too slick for any kind o' use!"

When all bonds were severed Uncle Billy, doubling up until his feet rested against Chincapin's back, deftly "skooted" himself back to shore without touching the deadly sands. And now, casting a noose about Dan's body, and slowly increasing the strain, he used Wild Hawk's own horse to drag his intended victim out of the jaws of death!

Even as he was doing this Hawkings showed signs of life, and while Dan lay panting on the ground Uncle Billy proceeded to investigate.

His shot would have proven instant death to ninety men out of a hundred, but Wild Hawk still lived. Both of his tools were dead, for with such a loved and precious life hanging in the balance, Uncle Billy had shot to kill!

Together they rudely bandaged Wild Hawk's wound, then bound him in the saddle, riding one on each side to lend him such support as could be given as they made their way back to Twin Ranch. And as they rode along, Uncle Billy told how he chanced to sight the outlaws just before they reached the verge of the quicksands.

Unluckily the river lay between them, and he had to seek a crossing further up, then steal near enough to make every shot count.

"Fer I knowed the p'izen imp'd drap ye, sure,

ef I was to give him even the ghost of a chance!"

Uncle Billy knew nothing of what had transpired at Twin Ranch, for he had not returned there, or met any of the cowboys since first starting out in quest of the missing youth, so the same glad surprise met them both when, at nearly midnight, they reached home.

Wilder Hawkings, still living, though so seriously wounded, was confronted with Neutral Nick, with Gordon Grable, with Mrs. Grable. He was plainly shown that the whole truth had been revealed, and asked by Colonel Jo to confess his part in the complicated game.

But he maintained a sullen silence, save when he was cursing them, one and all.

Colonel Jo had Dr. Perkins dress his wound—the bullet having passed entirely through his body—and then bade his men convey the inhuman wretch to the stables, for safe keeping.

Possibly they misunderstood his words: or, maybe, they reasoned that there was but one manner of "safe keeping" for such a knave. At any rate, when Colonel Jo went to pay Wild Hawk a visit in the morning, no Wilder Hawkings was to be found!

"I reckon he done run off, Kunnel Jo," quietly suggested Uncle Billy Breeze. "Reckon meb-be 'twon't do no airthly good chasin' after him, sence so long a time hes passed sence he skipped."

"Do you reckon he'll ever come back, Uncle Billy?" asked Colonel Jo, one hand rising to his lips, his black eyes steadily scanning that weather-beaten face.

"I don't reckon he'll ever come back, or make you all any funder bother, Kunnel Jo. No—I wouldn't mind takin' my solemn davy—he won't never come back!"

Without another word Colonel Jo turned away, fully satisfied that that evil life had done its worst: would never again trouble the people of Twin Ranch!

And he was right. Wilder Hawkings never came back. Nor could he return to mortal sight, unless No Bottom Sands were to prove false to its name and reputation.

Neutral Nick told where to look for the tattoo-mark on Chincapin Dan's shoulder, fully describing it. And when that "totem" was laid bare to all curious eyes, the last doubt vanished, and "Joseph Edward"—"Chincapin Dan"—no longer, save as a loving title on loving lips—came into his own again!

Neutral Nick was cared for until he recovered from his injury, then was fairly well fitted out, and sent on his way, with a wish that his remaining days might be put to better use than had his others.

Gordon Grable was likewise nursed back to health, and between them, Elma, Cora, and his mother, worked such a change in the wild youth that he solemnly vowed to fight his inherited thirst for strong drink, and to prove himself a real man!

And, so far as we know, he kept that pledge to the very letter.

For some little time there remained a stiffness between Mr. Mason and Chincapin Dan, but this gradually wore away. And when it was finally decided that the young heir should enter a private school, to make what amends he might for his wasted boyhood, it was with the understanding that, at the end of two years, he might claim Cora's hand, since he already possessed her heart.

That probation ended long enough ago to give time for a happy wedding, a cozy settling down in life, and—

"To fetch for'ard jest the smartest, 'cutest, beatin'est, bit o' shaver ye ever see!" declared Uncle Billy Breeze. "An' he's got a tetch o' Danny's looks, an' a sprinklin' o' his mammy's ha'r, an'—though ye'll think I'm lyin' ef ye don't stop to take 'nother look—the pesky leetle kid really an' truly an' shorely does favor ole Billy Breeze in the two eyes o' him—he jest do, now!"

"An' why fer not?" half belligerently looking at the happy father. "Why wouldn't he, out o' pure gratitude? Didn't I tell ye to hold yer grip—to show yer ole grit—an' ye'd putt the double-cinch into Young Jo, an' Wild Hawk, an' ole man Mason, an' Cory—no I didn't mean her, nuther, jest that way," humble a bit by the general laugh. "An' yit—billy-be-dug-gun ef I jest didn't, too! An' whar'll ye find sech 'nother tight an' snug an' well-fitten double-cinch as the one Pa'son Haywood buckled the two both o' ye together with? Sa-ay! Mebbe you'd jest tell a pore, mis'able critter that, now!"

And all agreed with the triumphant veteran.

THE END.

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